Not quite like a honeymoon

Charting the first 24 months of Sino-foreign educational programmes

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There is now a large range of studies that have considered various aspects and issues of Sino-foreign university collaboration – which remains a vexed and contentious issue. The aim of the present study is to identify the specific steps a group of Sino-foreign educational alliances took over their first two years – as viewed by Chinese and foreign university managers – as they struggled to develop a mature basis for ongoing alliance activity.

The paper notes that the initial formative years were ones of stress and strain. A total of sixteen (16), sequential steps have been identified in this study, which also notes that, at times, these steps could be taken out of sequence. It was only by the latter steps that the two sides had really formed the basis for longer-term activity. (In short it took about two years to achieve some sense of viable and realistic understanding of the realities of setting up and managing an educational joint venture in China). The paper provides a basic "roadmap" for university managers wishing to enter the China alliance market – and, at the same time, also makes some comments about some of the issues, problems and tensions which may arise within this crucial formative period.

Introduction

'Foreigners always worry about the big banquet and the money. Who worries about how to make it all work…?' (Chinese education manager)

One of the largest areas of Sino-foreign collaboration remains the area of education where over 10,000 alliances have been formed between Chinese and foreign universities since 1978. Research has tended to focus on issues of culture, organisation, management and even the funding of alliances – and the focus has tended to be on alliance behaviour over a three to five year period. What has not been researched in as much detail is how alliance partner managers (Chinese and foreign) behave over a shorter period of time, particularly during the crucial start up phase of an alliance. This study identifies a series of 16 stages alliances went through and it was not an easy process.

Literature review

The topic of higher education alliances between Chinese and foreign universities has been studied in detail by a variety of authors since the late 1970s, when the pace and rate of alliance began to speed up. Hayhoe's studies (1989, 1996) remain perhaps the best known. She considered alliances from the perspective of comparative education and evaluated some of the issues,

challenges and benefits of alliances for the two sides. She did not look at any given period of time, however, focussing instead on the alliances as a whole. At that time, the focus was still rather generic and focussed on frameworks and key, overriding issues and associated factors.

Alliances were divided into four categories by Willis (2001), who also considered other aspects of their structure, role, focus and rationale (2001 a,b,c; 2002 a,b,c). Again, however, this research took a 'whole of alliance view'. A different perspective was undertaken by Street (1992), Johnston (1996), Ross (1993), and Ross and Liu (1998), who considered some of the complexities of delivering courses and programmes in China (often emphasising issues of culture and the tensions faced by a foreigner in China), while Pepper (1996), considered university change and restructure in China, both noting, in passing, that this restructure provided a degree of impetus for international collaboration.

Again, the focus was on the larger picture rather than issues of detail. A number of Chinese authors (Deng, 1994; Jiang, 1995; Jing, 1995; Fang, 1996; Kok, 1996; Cui, 1997; Guo, 1997 and 1998; Huang, 1997; Dai, 2001), considered various aspects of collaboration and education change and restructure in China – but few (apart from Hayhoe's seminal studies), were able to chart trends in alliance activities, structure, and behaviour, across the short term. Others tended to focus on the macro and micro trends which helped to shape the environment in which educational activities were undertaken over time in China.

Studies, for example by Baird, Lyles, Li and Wharton (1991), Child (1994), Carey and Zou (1995), Canyon (1997), Fuxin and Gronin (1997), Benewick and Wingrove (1998), and Bray (1998) – help to set the framework and indeed background for the present study, by considering a range of factors and issues relevant to the formation and management of joint ventures in a Sino foreign context. Studies by Yau (1988), Xin (1996), Wong (1998), Wong and Leung (2001), Wong and Slater (2002), and Molinsky (2007) tended to consider specific cultural aspects and issues considered to be germane to 'doing business in China', and these studies together with some others which consider similar issues in specific industry situations (such as Wong, Luk and Li, 2005) help to provide some of the background for possible cultural issues which seem to impact on foreign activity in China.

By the mid part of the current decade, a number of studies had appeared (i.e. Willis, 2006) which tended to focus on more specific aspects and issues of collaboration. These studies remain somewhat holistic in their viewpoint and aim.

Method

Using a depth interview qualitative process as the basis for this study, research was undertaken in the following locations: Nanjing, Tianjin, Hangzhou, Wuxi, Beijing, Guangzhou, Ningbo, Shanghai.

In each city, a university joint venture involving a Chinese and foreign partner was investigated. Non-Chinese partners came from the USA, Australia, Canada, and countries in Europe. Each alliance had been operating for a minimum of four years.

The process used was to ask each manager (individually and never in a group) to discuss, in an open, non-directed, and unstructured manner, how the first two years of the alliance had gone, from their own perspective and view. This process was used to avoid 'leading' respondents and to enable them to reflect on the first two years of the alliance in their own way, according to their own ideas and in their own time.

The term 'First two years' was explained to be from the time they held their first significant meeting with the foreign (or Chinese) partner. Issues explored were as identified by respondents and they included issues of culture, structure, organisation, perception and distance. These issues gradually started to merge into an integrated series of steps. Data were collected over three years.

Findings

These were the steps.

Step 1: Testing the water on both sides.

During this stage the two sides behaved in a tentative, formalised, and almost ritualistic manner. They talked in general terms, did not commit themselves to much at all, and often sat in formal meetings talking around topics and issues in a somewhat guarded and formal manner. This was a stage where the two sides would sound each other out – but in a very careful and tentative manner.

It was almost ritualised. Each side would speak from its own objectives and position. Each would state its own ideas and views but in a general and unspecific manner. The Chinese would wonder, 'can the foreigners be trusted at all?' and 'do they have any real level

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of interest sincerity, commitment and honesty?', while the foreigners tended to wonder whether there was any real business opportunity or substantial chance of developing and delivering programmes. The Chinese tended to worry about more holistic issues than the foreigners who tended to be rather more concerned about options and opportunities for possible collaboration in a structured business sense. This was a stage of initial attitude formation – only.

Step 2: Taking the first tentative steps

During this stage the two sides would take the first very tentative steps towards collaboration. These steps could include some social activities (perhaps a dinner, a cultural performance or a visit), or possible activities where there could be some initial discussion about potential programmes and activities and other initiatives.

Discussions would be rather general at this stage but some ideas would start to emerge which were of a more specific nature than in the first step. For example, people might talk about the idea of an exchange or study abroad programme. They might talk about their experiences with certain programmes and activities. The ideas would certainly be rather vague at this stage but there would be a sense that the discussion table, if one can put it this way, now had something tangible on it. A perception of 'would, could, possibly, actually do something together' would start to emerge. However, any ideas (and associated feelings and perceptions) would be somewhat circumspect, carefully worded and one would not 'give away anything of value' to the other side at this very tentative stage.

This was a time of suggesting and waiting: listening and responding, talking about ideas and committing some small aspects of oneself or one's organisation. However, there was also a sense of gathering momentum. But it was very early days. The view was: 'we feel that we have something of value to offer each other but we are not sure...'

Step 3: Thinking and acting about each other

Respondents noted that it was around this stage that they would start to think rather more assertively or actively about each other than they had done in the first two steps of the developing alliance. They would wonder: could we really do business together, would this work? Could I see this being a successful partnership? What do I actually think about this? Is there potential here or not? A sense of affective and cogni-

tive reflection would take place at this juncture and people would start to consider various aspects of a possible alliance in terms of people, emotions and possible programmes.

It was a time for initial reflection, testing views and perceptions and thinking in terms of resources and structure. These thoughts were undertaken in private with one's peers, and quite often away from the negotiating venue, such as a Chinese or foreign university campus. One also had to consider how to act in future (which could be tomorrow or in a few minutes) and what one wanted from the alliance (if it could be developed) and the associated relationships. Suddenly, one felt drawn into a higher level of both introspection and discernible commitment. As one said, 'I felt that there was a certain sense of pace and action, but it was still rather unclear where we were going!'

Step 4: Setting up some initial activities – testing the water.

It was only now that the two sides would start to consider undertaking a few initial and fairly basic activities. These initial activities would usually be small, short term, basic and not particularly demanding, yet in a symbolic manner they were actually very important.

They would test the ability of the two sides to work together at a human and affective level and would also determine whether they were able to collaborate on an activity or range of activities which had some discernible benefit. A small core group would now emerge to be the champions of the alliance. This group had to be formed to progress any further.

Step 5: Worrying to ourselves about the programme and about each side

The very act of setting up a few trial projects and forming an integrated core group tended to raise problems, tensions and issues because people on both sides now had to start to commit – money, time and themselves. The alliance would now go through a period of – almost – rethinking, reconfiguration, worry and tension. Some might not have expected this situation at this time: but it was there.

Step 6: Taking stronger steps: bolder programmes and new initiatives

By now, it had been decided to take a few bold steps and develop and implement some more expansive alli-

ance activities and programmes which could be of a range of types:

- Larger activities of a single type (such as a bigger exchange programme, perhaps based on an initial exploratory programme).
- A range of activities and programmes which themselves could be divided into two types: activities undertaken just in China or activities undertaken both in China and abroad.
- Activities which had a defined time period and activities which were perceived to be possibly ongoing.
- Programmes which were of varying levels of scale – ranging from small to large.

In regard to these options, a range of approaches was also possible for implementation: activities could be expanded and built up over time or started at a large scale initially (this tended to depend on the level of empathy, and confidence expressed by the two sides). Large scale projects were often too hard to handle, a staggered step-by-step approach was usually better. One needed to be patient – this was not easy.

Step 7: Taking stock

By now (and this could be part way through step six if the activities or projects were staggered) there was a need for a period of 'taking stock' in the alliance. Perhaps some programmes and activities had been underway for a reasonable period of time – and it was now time to review the programmes, activities and indeed relationships amongst core staff within the alliance.

The views of key staff from each side needed to be evaluated and considered as did the views and ideas of outer core staff. Programmes were often changed and reconfigured at this juncture. New programmes were sometimes added to supplement those already planned and some programmes might be discontinued.

Step 8: Early problems and hiccups

During the roll out of programmes (if a staggered process was used as discussed in step six) or at any time in the conduct of a major set of projects and activities, problems would occur constantly: and some were:

- Where initial programmes and activities had met with teething problems (this happened in almost all cases, respondents noted) – usually it was an issue of the two sides simply underestimating the level of

organisational complexity in developing and delivering a programme in China.

- Where there were problems with expectations on one or both sides (often where programmes had been rolled out too slowly or even too fast).
- Where there was concern about how to balance (or even identify) programme delivery in China vis á vis back in the home university (i.e. in Canada or Australia) and on what basis and criteria.
- Where key people started to argue amongst themselves (on one side or the other or on both sides), and with stakeholders in parent universities and so on (often on the basis of problems with activities, programmes, and expectations or simply the level of complexity required to deliver projects in China.
- Where initial enthusiasm started to wane to be replaced by a sense that the delivery of activities and the project itself was simply going to be hard work not always enhanced by positive cross cultural encounters.

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By now one needed to be realistic: an alliance was something of a volatile creature. It would never quite settle.

Step 9: Time to develop systems and processes

By now (and, again this could be part way through step six or at the end – or at any point of time within a defined period of a programme) there was a significant recognition that behind the various programmes and activities was a need for the establishment of far more elaborate systems and processes which would provide the real frameworks for activities and projects which had often been delivered, thus far, in a relatively haphazard manner, partly on the basis of enthusiasm and trust and partly because the two sides tended to underestimate the level of detailed planning required to manage and deliver a programme successfully in China. Both sides now needed (and wanted) structure, processes, organisation. These needed somehow to wed home-based processes (e.g. in Australia) with Chinese reality, and this was hard.
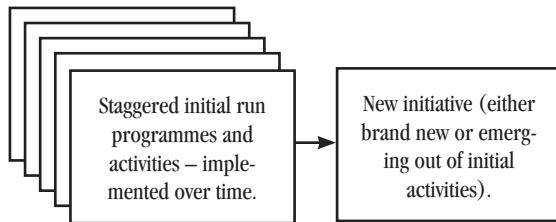
Step 10: New initiatives – the start of a true and multifaceted alliance

After the first round of initiatives and programmes discussed from step six, alliances tended to develop (and this could be as early as in the second year of

the alliance) a range of revised, consolidated or new programmes which usually grew out of earlier programmes which were more basic and initial in orientation, design and implementation. These new programmes tended to form the real backbone of a successful alliance. Whereas an initial programme might have been, for example, to send some students to Australia, almost as a trial or a test, now, the two sides would start to develop a more complex study abroad programme with more depth and rigour. These programmes would have far more complexity, detail and even commitment behind them.

If the various initial programmes discussed in step six had been implemented in a sequential manner it was not unusual, in a larger alliance (where there were a range of programmes and activities) to observe new, often consolidated activities, being implemented side by side with the gradual roll out of initial programmes as follows:
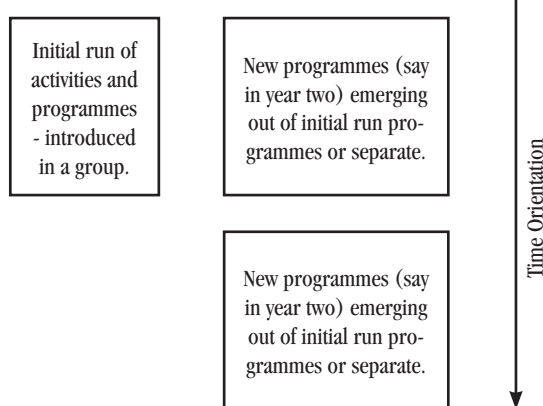
Figure 1: Staggered approach

Often in an alliance new initial, trial activities could therefore be observed over a course of time while consolidated, new and more solid activities were also launched at key points in the alliance.

On the other hand in some alliances the situation was more like this – a time based approach:

Figure 2: Time based approach

(And so on).

Either way, the point is that over time, successful alliances would gradually develop more complete, complex, sustainable and time proven programmes and activities which would provide the basis for a more mature and fully developed alliance. This sense of initial and longer-term orientation and design was a key aspect of alliances in China.

Step 11: Stepping forwards and backwards – taking the slow dance towards integration…

By now, the alliance had reached the stage whereby a range of activities had been underway for some period of time. Some programmes were still usually being trialled while others had been consolidated and established as core offerings of the alliance. If all was going well, there was now a sense on both sides that the alliance could actually work in the longer term. As one said: 'we had – perhaps for the first time – a sense of depth, of real commitment and of tangibility in terms of our activities and projects'.

In a sense, the two sides could now take stock, rethink their respective and integrated positions and think about the future. It was as if the core business was now underway to the point where issues of strategy and longer-term orientation could now be considered. It was by about this time that the two sides would often reflect on the complexities and stresses of establishing and operationalising a joint venture programme. There was a sense of maturation.

Step 12: Melding ideas, actions, plans and practicalities

Now, at last, it was time to 'get serious' about the longer term strategic objectives of the alliance, and during this stage new and often larger plans were laid down by the two sides for the longer term. A number of options now emerged:

* To maintain the alliance in its original format and focus (perhaps sharp, small, limited and strategic) – but to now deepen this sharp, narrow focus.
* To extend the alliance into additional areas of activity as a process of diversity.
* To expand the alliance into new locations (often replicating programmes across various locations to secure additional income).
* To reconfigure the alliance into various streams of activities (i.e. basic programmes, high value activities, brand development initiatives) and so on to develop a greater sense of maturity and complexity using any or a combination of the above strategies.

It was time to consider all of these approaches in order to move the alliance from an initial and rather basic structure encompassing a range of initial and core activities, to a new plane of solidity, depth and strength. If this review and consolidation did not take place, all respondents agreed that the alliance would fail – it would remain somehow tentative, elusive, basic and lacking in real integrity and strength. There had to be this period of real strategic consolidation and long term planning. It was now that the mists and clouds cleared: and if they did not the alliance would falter.

Step 13: Our first big problems

Increased commitment, however, tends to come at a price. The more the two sides, and particularly the Chinese, developed, expanded and strengthened the alliance (in terms of activities and programmes but also at the human relationship level), the greater the level of commitment and sense that there was much to gain but also much to lose.

When the alliance was simply testing a few programmes or running a basic exchange or similar programme, in a sense no one was too worried. But now the situation was rather different; now there were real feelings or perceptions that the stakes were higher, the issue of face was more critical and people had now started to commit at a far more personal and organisational level. Now quite serious tensions developed because the alliance was more serious. It was a difficult time. One had to be careful. As one said: 'it was kind of strange – we had come this far and then we felt that it was all in danger. It was almost as if the more serious we got, the more we worried about it all!'

Step 14: Do we have an alliance yet?

By now, the two sides (or at least the core inner staff with well-developed relationships and a sense of genuine commitment to the alliance) could start to reflect and ponder whether they did, at last, have a well-developed, mature and established alliance. Now they could think that there could be a serious long term future for their alliance, if all had gone well. This includes the negotiation about the problems and issues, and the stresses associated with an alliance are part of the maturing process.

What they now also could start to think about was the observation that an alliance would always be about change, problems, tensions, resolution, and innovation and would probably never be particularly stable or easy. This was the start of a real alliance.

Step 15: Growing pains – at home, abroad, with work, and with colleagues

By about now it had become evident to respondents that an alliance was always a thing of change, stress, strain and tension. These strains were structural in nature but also cross-cultural and, in addition, a result of the range and scope of stakeholders. There were always (daily) problems of culture, organisation, activities, processes, confusion and money.

Things never settled: this was one of the secrets of success: to realise this fact, even if one had by now developed a range of viable activities and indeed relationships. As the alliance grew, matured, developed and waxed and waned there were always problems, tensions and issues. This was reality. And this was part of success.

Step 16: We can't see over the mountain but at least we can climb it together

By about the end of the second year, respondents in this cohort felt that they had developed the basis for a true, longer term alliance. In a way, this was the true start of something longer, real and tangible. By now, there was an expectation that:

- The two sides had developed a reasonably mature and empathetic set of relationships amongst core staff which would provide the basis for ongoing and continued alliance success.
- Organisational details including plans, processes, staffing, roles, expectations and objectives had been put into place to provide the alliance with a kind of fundamental structural basis for ongoing activity.
- Expectations had started to mature in the sense that the two sides now had an understanding of how complex it was to manage a cross cultural alliance, and they had also trialled, developed and implemented a range of activities and projects which would start to form the core of an alliance over the longer term.
- There was now some history between the two sides (albeit only over a period of up to two years), but this did help to provide a sense of the past, the present and the future. That is, there was a growing sense of commitment to the longer term based on the fact that the alliance had now lasted for up to two years or so.
- There was a growing sense of being able to treat the alliance as a genuine and real entity of its own rather than just a convenient linking of forces from two very different sides for the sake of a few programmes, activities and trials.

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Use of the steps and the associated issues and findings

The paper indicated that there were many steps to forge an alliance over the first two years and managers on both sides (Chinese and foreign) need to recognise that each step is part of the process of building a valuable and genuine alliance. There was no quick and easy way to shortcut the process. It was only by the end of year two that the alliance had reached a stage of some kind of viability. This is a process which requires time, patience, negotiation, trial and error, and above all – commitment. The idea that one can sign an alliance, settle it in and then expect no problems is a myth. This study shows that even in the first two years the process is at once volatile and sequential. This is a volatile world. There is no escaping this.

In essence, and to sum up, it is possible to glean from the various stages a sense of four major periods within the formation of an alliance:

1. Tentative beginnings: formal, home based (where the two sides tended to view issues and options almost solely from their home base world – that is from a Chinese or foreign perspective), uncommitted, tentative and naïve.

2. Early steps: a few activities undertaken, enthusiastic, committed (to a degree) – but naïve. This was a stage of enthusiastic but somewhat superficial engagement on both sides. It was rather like a 'fools gold' alliance stage – far from the real thing!

3. Reassessment: where the two sides tended to start to realise that an alliance was a complex activity involving a range of aspects and dimensions. This was a period of introspection, and what tended to emerge was a new and deeper level of recognition, understanding and, indeed, affective and cognitive awareness of what it was really going to take to make an alliance work.

4. Realism: where the two sides showed a new level of recognition about the issues, problems, challenges and opportunities embodied in an educational alliance. It was at this stage, and only at this stage, that the two sides could start to move their alliance to a new and higher level of engagement. What had changed, in a word, was commitment: a sense of what it would really take to make an alliance viable and successful in a world of cross cultural and organisational complexity – let alone, in regard to the specific aspects of educational delivery. What had also changed (to a degree) was a sense of 'us' rather than 'us and them' – that is: a recognition that the whole of the alliance was indeed rather more than just the sum of the individual parts for two very different partners. It was now, and only now, that the alliance had a platform which could start to provide the basis for some kind of longer-term success. What was sad was that so many alliances never even reached this platform.

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