Founded in 1898, Peking University was the first national comprehensive university in China. From the beginning, the university viewed its responsibility to establish modern higher education in China as part of the rejuvenation of the nation. It helped to establish China’s modern academic disciplinary system across all fields of study, from humanities to natural sciences and medicine, making it the patron of China’s higher education system.

An auspicious beginning

At the beginning of the 20th century, in the midst of China’s New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, Peking University was instrumental in disseminating progressive ideas, and establishing the tradition of “patriotism, progress, democracy, and science.” It was also the first university to spread Marxist, democratic, and scientific ideas in China. Peking University has strong ties with the establishment of the Communist Party of China, but has also been at the forefront of the country’s modernization, making essential contributions to the emancipation and restoration of the nation and the betterment of Chinese society.

Peking University was the first school in China to propose the spirit of “academic freedom and inclusiveness,” attracting some of the greatest minds in the country (and possibly the world), who went on to promote higher education at the university. During the turmoil of World War II, Peking University survived by joining forces with Tsinghua University and Nankai University, forming the National Southwestern Associated University. The Associated University produced many notable scientists, including Li Zhengdao (Tsung-Dao Lee) and Yang Zhenning (Chen-Ning Yang), both Nobel Prize winners in physics (also the first Chinese to be awarded the Nobel Prize), as well as Zhu Guangya and Deng Jiaxian, the founding fathers of nuclear science in China. After the war, these universities reverted to their original names.

Following the founding of the People’s Republic of China, Peking University continued to excel in science and technology. From 1958 to 1965, in cooperation with the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), the university was the first in the world to synthesize crystallized bovine insulin, an important milestone in protein synthesis. In 1972, alumna Tu Youyou successfully isolated the antimalarial compound artemisinin, saving millions of lives and winning her the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2015. In 1975, Wang Xuan developed laser typesetting technology, taking the Chinese printing industry into a new age and receiving the Top National Science and Technology Award in 2001. CAS Academician Xu Guangxian and his team made significant contributions to the theory and application of rare-earth element separation, helping China become a global leader in rare-earth production and utilization. He was awarded the Top National Science and Technology Award in 2008 for this work.

Excelling locally and globally

Peking University has long been fertile ground for growing and nurturing domestic talent. Until 2016, nine of the 27 recipients of China’s Top National Science and Technology Award were Peking University alumni. Additionally, approximately 500 alumni have been granted prestigious academician status by either CAS or the Chinese Academy of Engineering, and they remain pillars of Chinese society.

Over the past 30 years, the university has continued to strengthen its foundation in the basic sciences, while also fostering cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research. By establishing several research institutions under a newly adopted tenure-track system and assembling world-class research teams, the university has improved its overall scientific research capacity and made significant advances in many areas, including rare-earth functional materials; low-dimensional carbon-based materials; high-dimensional algebraic geometry; microcavity photonics and ultrafast optics; the study of quasars and supermassive black holes; the synthesis of complex natural products; vaccine development; the control of cell fate determination through small molecules; whole-genome amplification methods for single-cell
sequencing; ultra-small laser accelerators; fast, high-resolution miniature two-photon microscopy; and innovative drug development. Certain technological developments pioneered at the university have already been widely accepted, including carbon-based nanoelectronic devices, a new standard for ultra-high definition video coding, and novel tumor-specific imaging agents for microscopy.

Furthermore, Peking University is the most globalized university in mainland China. It has established exchange partnerships with more than 380 top universities and institutions from over 60 countries and regions, and welcomed thousands of outstanding young international students. Yenching Academy, a postgraduate college of Peking University, builds bridges internationally through its interdisciplinary Master’s program in China Studies, which trains exceptional graduates from around the world. The academy aims to shape the next generation of global citizens by providing a nuanced understanding of China and its global role. The university’s Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development offers graduate programs to cultivate leaders from developing countries, who will learn to apply Chinese principles to global governance. In the period between 2006 and 2015, Peking University published 16,921 papers in cooperation with foreign universities and institutions, which comprise 33.5% of all papers published at the university during that time.

Bringing Peking University to the world

Peking University has always upheld its honored legacies and traditions, epitomized by its courage and its resolution to “take the lead in the world.” Generations of “PKUers” have a singular dream: to make Peking University a leading international institution and an academic sanctuary to which all students and scholars aspire.

On the centennial anniversary of the founding of Peking University in 1917, the Chinese government launched Project 985, to establish world-class universities across the country. In 2017, the Double First-Class Initiative was introduced to create not only world-class universities, but world-class academic disciplines as well. Boasting the largest number of disciplines participating in this initiative, Peking University has now become the benchmark for all Chinese universities. Its overarching mission is to contribute Chinese wisdom and the Chinese way of thinking—which are deeply rooted in the country’s history—to further global development. It will do this in four ways:

First, it will provide an education that teaches both knowledge and moral values, incorporating the best of Chinese and Western civilization to cultivate motivated and creative students. By rooting itself in the deep soil of Chinese civilization and Oriental culture, it will maintain the ideal of developing “virtues, talents, and health” by being “boldly creative and keenly visionary,” honoring ancient traditions while not being enslaved by them. It will foster the growth of outstanding individuals with practical abilities and a global outlook, equipping them with a healthy body and mind, and the ability to think independently and innovatively.

Second, special focus will be given to solving real-world societal problems by contributing new knowledge, new ideas, and new technologies that promote the creation of a shared future for mankind. Playing on its strengths of “nurturing academia and inspiring ideas,” the university will plant and nourish the seeds of new ideas about Chinese socialism so as to disseminate Chinese voices and add Chinese contributions to the modernization of humankind. Aiming to be at the forefront of global development, the university will create a free and open academic atmosphere, assemble first-class scientific research teams, and enhance its capacity for innovation, while providing innovation-driven strategic services for China. As part of its strategic goals, the university aims to generate knowledge and ideas that can influence future generations and solve practical problems across the globe.

Third, it is the obligation of Peking University to explore new means to build world-class universities, and to provide satisfactory education for the Chinese people. As China’s most influential university, it must take the lead in developing the country’s higher education system. Making the most of the Double First-Class Initiative and the ongoing comprehensive reform in higher education, the university aims to create a freer and more harmonious academic environment, and a modern university system centered around Chinese characteristics, by emphasizing the need to promote quality education over simply growing enrollment. Additionally, it will strive to encourage the reform and development of higher education both domestically and internationally.

Finally, Peking University will implement a strategy of greater openness to the world. The university is committed to strengthening its cooperation with other world-class schools, international academic organizations, and educational research institutions, so that all parties involved can learn from each other, inspiring dynamism and ingenuity.

At Peking University, we guarantee that the talents of both faculty and students will be proudly supported. We will encourage mutual understanding, trust, tolerance, respect, and appreciation among everyone, so that a positive culture can be established on campus. We will continue to work hard to advance reform and innovation, and to realize our primary dream of being at the forefront of world-class universities.