

SOOCHOW UNIVERSITY'S 120 YEARS OF ACHIEVEMENT

2020 marks the 120th anniversary of the founding of Soochow University (SU) in Suzhou, People's Republic of China. An interview with its president, Sidong Xiong, a biologist, outlines the university's legacy, development strategy, vision and blueprint for future success.



*Sidong Xiong,
President,
Soochow University*

SU EMBRACES TRADITION AND INNOVATION.

Can you outline the university's evolution?

SU's history and legacy of entrepreneurship are interwoven with local culture. The historic city of Suzhou was founded by an enterprising forefather of Northwest China who gave up his throne to explore the Jiangnan land around 1300 BC. Around 1900, innovative missionary intellectuals such as Young John Allen and David Lawrence Anderson introduced Western ideas of higher education, and the university was founded modelling a modern Western university with a central tenet of entrepreneurship.

Following its motto of 'Unto a full grown man', SU is committed to revitalizing the nation through education. Three milestone changes define its evolution. The first took place after the founding of the People's Republic of China with the institution's refashioning into a teachers' college, marking a stronger tie with its cultural roots. The second was its transformation into a

comprehensive university after the national reform. The third strategic change occurred as a result of its inclusion by China's Double First-Class Initiative in the new era. Over the past 120 years, SU has produced more than 500,000 graduates, active and acknowledged in all walks of life globally.

SU DEFINES ITSELF BY FRONTIER RESEARCH AND SERVICE FOR THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL COMMUNITY.

How do you interpret 'Ding Tian Li Di', the university's 'sky and ground' strategy?

A metaphor may help. SU is a big tree. A tree grows upwards with its roots deep in the ground. We, too, reach upwards in our endeavour in key frontier areas such as materials, biology, medicine, optoelectronics, AI, and social governance. We try to attract and introduce talents with international influence, and working with strong partners at home and abroad, we have built many flagship platforms and international labs including the CAM-SU Genetic Research Center and the Institute for Advanced Study. Meanwhile, we are firmly grounded in China's fundamental realities,

national and local needs. For instance, our 19 affiliated hospitals deliver medical services to more than 20 million patients annually. In short, we reach up in leading frontier areas of research and expand our social involvement and contribution.

SU IS DRIVEN BY HARD AND SOFT POWER.

How does SU build its comprehensive strength?

SU needs to have more comprehensive strength, both hard and soft. Its tangible strength depends on its 3,000-plus professors, its huge body of excellent students aiming high and working hard, and its sufficient advanced facilities such as the 'cloud university'. The essence of strength lies in talents, which are the primary driver of growth and key to future success. We have been introducing talents of international vision and visibility from across the globe, and our effort is encouraging. This growing talent pool boosts our research innovation. According to Lens Score, SU is a leader in innovation among Chinese universities. At

the same time, it promotes its culture and modern governance, which are intrinsic to soft power. We carry forward the university's tradition and values, thus, creating a stronger tie of legacy and moral standards within the SU community. We also optimize university governance by rules and norms. Our effort in both tangible and intangible aspects helps to empower the university.

SU DEVELOPS EMINENT INDIVIDUALS.

How do you plan and implement the cultivation of professional individuals?

The university is a passage to the future. A fundamental mission is to prepare individuals in this regard. With knowledge explosion, skills 'expire' faster than ever. We must think outside the box and beyond the times. There is an imminent demand for high calibre, future-oriented professionals. To better equip students with the right skills and vision, we try to create a great learning space, enrich their learning experiences, and lead them to navigate across and even beyond domains of knowledge with positive values,

critical thinking, analytical skills, and global perspectives—all needed to rise to future challenges. Meanwhile, we also emphasize the development of individuals for this era, which has its specific practical needs. To this end, we strengthen university-industry synergy, prepare professionals for the leading and pillar industries, and offer hands-on learning experiences through cooperative and outreach programmes.

SU PLACES ITSELF IN A GREATER, GLOBAL CONTEXT.

What measures have you taken to make this 'local' university a more global one?

I would like to define SU as 'glocal', or local and global. It is local in its rootedness in Chinese culture, realities, needs and pursuits. However, no aspiring university can afford to confine itself to its national boundaries, since the world is increasingly a community with a shared future. Some of our measures to go global include subjecting our undertakings to international standards, further strengthening the current 222 international cooperative programmes, and experimenting with new ways of partnership. Apart from our 'coming in' strategy in recruitment of international faculty and students, with 3,310 international students from 72 countries, we also practise a 'going out' strategy, branching out worldwide via overseas campuses (including Soochow University in Laos), platforms, international alliances, and

our CAMP (channel, ability, motivation, and programme) initiative.

SU MAINTAINS A STRONG TRAJECTORY.

How do you define and achieve the vision of the university?

Our vision is to build an inclusive, responsible, and internationally visible world-class research university committed to the sustainable development goals of humanity. It depends much on our management of four relationships. The first is the relationship between the pace of growth and quality. We need to stay cautious in accelerating the university's growth. Rather than following a less sound path of development, we try to inject fresh vitality and drive to sustain development. The second is the balance between change and continuity. While we acknowledge the need to respond to the changing needs of society, we value our tradition and legacy. The third is the integration between the internal driver and external push, the internal driver being excellence in teaching and research. The fourth is the part-whole relationship. We shall keep the momentum of our leading areas while striving towards an all-round development of SU as a whole. If these relationships are handled properly, SU will be able to maintain its momentous trajectory and be recognized in China and far beyond. ■