

Chapter 7

Elite Making Policies: The Chinese Way of Taking on the University Ranking Systems

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how China has responded to global university ranking systems and successfully positioned itself by examining the history and development of international university rankings and their impact on global higher education institutions (HEIs). China's rise within these rankings is the focus along with the policies and strategies that enabled its HEIs, particularly through initiatives like the 211 and 985 projects. These policies, aimed at fostering elite universities, have influenced the international status of Chinese universities. This chapter also looks at the socio-political factors that shape Chinese HEIs, including governance structures and academic freedom, highlighting challenges in aligning with global standards. Lastly, the research discusses the broader implications of these policies on Chinese HEIs and its role in the global landscape. The findings suggest that while China has made considerable strides in improving its HEIs' global rankings, challenges remain in achieving true academic autonomy and balancing domestic priorities with international recognition.

INTRODUCTION

The international ranking systems are a fiercely debated issue, shifting in its role and scope (King, 2015). International rankings are diversifying, moving towards more broadly balanced criteria, and becoming ever more multidimensional (Yud-

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kevich, Altbach, & Rumbley, 2016); however, the race and struggle for international appraisals are not without opposition and ramifications. For some countries, the ranking systems can be viewed as a tool to attract more international students and foreign academics with more prestigious roles and positions, to leave their home nations (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2017).

In comparison, some countries view the rankings in a different light and think about them in a more practical manner to be used as a valuable tool for benchmarking but also as a culpability tool, particularly for public institutions where institutions are held accountable for their performances (Allen, 2021; Marginson, 2009; Shin & Harman, 2009). The opportunities presented to globalise and ultimately motivate many Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) to prime themselves and eventually launch themselves into the world of university rankings. Governmental policies have spurred many institutions into action.

This chapter has three primary purposes. Firstly, to explore international rankings, how they started, and the trends and consequences of the ranking systems. Secondly, look at what China has done to rise quickly and ultimately catch up with other countries in the global ranking systems by exploring how Chinese HEIs, in general, have evolved and changed so that they can propel themselves into the twenty-first century as global leaders. Thirdly, the purpose is to discuss the outcomes of the educational policies. I will also look at current trends and challenges facing Chinese HEIs entering, thriving, and ultimately being recognised as genuine global higher education providers.

World Rankings: In the Beginning

The concept of evaluating and assessing universities is deep-rooted within British history. “Where We Get Our Best Men” (Maclean, 1900) is credited with being one of the university ranking system's first articles and publications. At the turn of the last century and at the time of the “Great Man” Leadership model (Northouse, 2021), people were curious to know where these “Great Men” came from and what educational backgrounds they had. Subsequently, from this thinking and surveying of these men, a list of universities catalogued by the number of prominent former students was collated and disseminated (Myers & Robe, 2009). However, the exercise was rapidly copied in other countries. At the time, it gained debate outside of academic institutions between contemporaries as to which institution produced the great leaders of the time. This carried on in some shape or another for the next eighty years.

However, for the most part, things didn't change for a long time, and the public didn't pay much attention to what happened in the world of academia. However, things changed in 1983 in the USA when the US News published an article titled

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