

University rankings in China: Contexts, practices and concerns

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ABSTRACT

Resulting from the altered relationship between universities and governments, university rankings have aroused enormous interest in China. The rankings emerged originally to meet the demand from customers, as market competition in higher education became more common, and the Chinese government adopted strategies of information provision to ensure academic quality, provide student consumers with much needed information, and inform universities and policymakers on areas needing improvement. The exercises, however, look rather dubious in many ways and their negative side effects have become increasingly apparent. This article examines the development of university rankings in China focusing particularly on their inclusions, definitions, methods, implications and effects. It is argued that the rankings have lost their original institutional meaning and failed to indigenise themselves according to China's actuality, due to their superficial adoption of foreign practices and the modifications based on de-institutionalisation. This article concludes that the rankings have become shallow, distorted and misleading. It calls for great caution when they are utilised.

Introduction

There appears to be an explosion of university ranking systems both internationally and within countries. Although the rankings are often too simple and inappropriate, they are highly visible, even cannot be evaded or escaped (Marginson, 2007). As shown by the American experience, they significantly affect universities' applications and admissions. Listing higher education institutions or their specific academic programmes, departments and schools in an order determined by certain factors, started in China from the 1950s when the Chinese government designated some key universities, and divided higher education institutions into various categories under the jurisdiction of different ministries, provinces and municipalities (Yang, 1998). While such practices remain, they have much less impact nowadays on students, parents and the general public. As the market is introduced into China's higher education, Chinese universities are under increasing public scrutiny (Yang, Vidovich & Currie, 2007) in a context of the formation of an evaluative state (Neave, 1998), and higher education becoming an increasingly expensive purchase. The demand for consumer information on academic quality from students and their families has led to the development of university rankings by commercial entities. Similar to the international situations (Bowden, 2000; Dill & Soo, 2005), university rankings in China have also been heavily criticised for their statistical inaccuracy, for the measures chosen to represent academic quality, and for their negative impact on the overall performance of universities. Their inclusions, definitions, methods, implications and effects are of great importance. An analysis of the Chinese practices and debates would help

towards an understanding of the basic features of university rankings in general, and of the Chinese circumstances in particular.

Contexts

Chinese university rankings were not dropped from passing aeroplanes. They have resulted from a variety of contextual factors. The first is the increasing commodification of education and the according arrangement of policy along market lines. The term commodification “discusses social relations conducted as and in the form of relations between commodities or things” (Bottomore, Laurence, Kiernan & Miliband, 1991: 87). This “fantastic form of the relation between things” (Marx, 1952: 31) transforms human properties, relations and actions, into things independent of persons and governing their lives. Commodification is built on the belief in market ideologies, the attempt to introduce the language, logic and principles of private market exchange into public institutions, and the increasing control of corporate culture over every aspect of life as a result of the neoliberal globalisation that has impacted current policy discourse (McLaren, 2005: 27). This has led to an increasing emphasis on market relevance and the disciplines of competition and profit.

This movement has profound implications for the universities in China, where a rapid transition is undergoing from free education to a fee-based system. After being closed to international contacts for decades, China abandoned its planned system and adopted a policy of opening to the outside world in late 1970s. Since then, the Chinese have been keen on market ideologies, often lacking a comprehensive, systematic study of them. Education policy, management and governance are pressured to improve service delivery and better governance (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi, 2005). Once relying entirely on government funding, with their management highly centralised by the state, Chinese universities are now pushed by the government to adopt a doctrine of monetarism characterised by market freedom (Apple, 2000). The revitalised engagement in education of non-state sectors, including the market, the community, the third sector and civil society, has been promoted by the government. Commodification of educational institutions has become an instrument of economic and social policy.

Within such policy discourse, China’s higher education reforms have been aligned with those in the economic sector. Building up close links between universities and the market has been the most prominent orientation, together with decentralisation in finance and management in the reform of education. During the past two and a half decades, great efforts have been made to introduce the function of the market in education. Universities and colleges offered contract training in exchange for fees – in a market-oriented experiment endorsed by the Decision on the Reform of the Educational Structure issued by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCPCC) in 1985 – and became part of the reform. As the market gained more significance in China, especially in the more developed coastal and urban areas, more substantial reform policies were introduced to make structural changes in education. The Programme for Education Reform and Development in China, jointly issued by the CCPCC and the State Council in 1993, reaffirmed the 1985 Decision’s commitment for central government to refrain from direct control of education. This reform was formalised into Article 53 of Education Law in 1995.

It did not take very long for Chinese universities to face the market on all fronts. As part of the commodification of education, China established a higher education tuition fee policy. The tuition fees charged by both public and private higher institutions increased dramatically from 4.34% of the cost of a course in 1992 (around 600 yuan) to 12.12% (around 3,000) in 1993 and 25% in 1998 (Zhang, 1998: 246). Public universities charged 4,000 yuan in 1999, while the average income of each peasant and urban resident in the east region was respectively 3,344.6 and 9,125.92 yuan, and 1,604.1 and 4472.91 yuan respectively in the West. By 2002, only 49% of higher education funding came from governments; 27% was tuition fees. The charges accelerated to about 6,000 yuan in 2005. Some private institutions and the for-profit campuses affiliated to public universities charged well

above 10,000 yuan (Yang, 2007). Against this background, students become customers, and are increasingly aware of the value for their money.

The second contextual factor is the massification of Chinese higher education. Influenced by the World Bank's (1999) research finding that showed major challenges to China's higher education by its fast-growing economy in the previous two decades, the Chinese government realised that there was an insufficient supply of higher education. On 24 December 1998, the State Council promulgated the Education Development Plan for the 21st Century, drafted jointly by the State Planning Commission and the Ministry of Education (MOE), to accelerate the pace of expansion to enrol 15% of the age cohorts into higher education by 2010. With the fast expansion, the 15% enrolment target was moved to 2005 in the 10th National Five-Year Plan (2001–2005). The total number of students enrolled in regular higher education institutions has since increased substantially from 3,408,700 in 1998 to 15,617,800 in 2005. China's national overall enrolment rate of 21% of the age cohort has created the world largest higher education system, marking a transition from elite to mass higher education (Trow, 1974; Pretorius & Xue, 2003). The percentages of secondary school graduates receiving higher education changed from 40% in 1998 to 65.5% in 2001 (Yang, 2002: 17).

These percentages contrast sharply with figures from the past. For example, only 2.4% of secondary school graduates could be admitted to universities in 1981 (Yang, 2004). The expanded access to higher education has changed the role of higher education in people's life. During the pre-reform years when higher education was in short supply, every year millions of pre-selected high school students sat the National College Entrance Exam, yet only a very lucky few would gain entry to universities. People would basically be satisfied with any higher education. The choice of university and how universities were run was not of much concern to the majority of the Chinese people. Now, after more than 20 years of market-oriented reform, the role of university education has been fundamentally changed. University education, which was designed to train the very few, is now reaching the many.

Meanwhile, the competition between universities in securing funding and good students has become intense. The government as an investor and the students as consumers select universities with vigour and great care. Universities have become more aware of the impact of market forces. There is now a great demand for market measures, with which universities could ascertain their market position and define its competitiveness. These same measures are also critical for the government in assessing the performance of the university administration. Most importantly, these measures can serve as a "shopping guide" for the general society, students as well as those who care about them.

The third contextual factor is China's quest for world-class universities. China is emerging as a fully-fledged world power playing an increasingly active role in international affairs. Having impressed the world with the creation of glittering, international quality infrastructure, the erstwhile Middle Kingdom realises the connection between a nation's overall power and the quality of its higher education and has now turned its attention to transforming its universities into world-class institutions. It is eager to have a higher education system of international stature, to provide top-quality education for future leaders of the nation, and to earn greater respect in the global community. Educational upgrading is China's current top national priority at the elite edge of university life. China is investing heavily in its top universities at a time when many developed countries are reducing investment in their flagship universities and are disinclined to increase the scientific capacity of their greatest institutions of higher education (Levin, 2005).

To build a network of world-class universities, the Chinese government initiated a priority-funding policy that channels extra money into the nation's top universities. Central to this are two policies that have come to be known as Projects 211 and 985. First announced in 1993 by the central government and implemented in 1995, Project 211 gave existing universities and newly merged institutions the opportunity to bid for nearly US\$20 billion in priority government funding.

Approximately 100 universities have been approved to receive additional funding to improve facilities and curriculums within some or all of their academic departments. The government is developing through the network 80 key academic disciplinary areas and 602 specialisations. Other key measures associated with Project 211 include the commercialisation of research findings, reform of university administration and management, and strengthening of international cooperation and exchanges (Ma, 2007).

Supplemental to 211 funding are three-year grants that were made available to a smaller group of universities under what is known as Project 985. When it was first announced in 1998, funding was made available to an elite group of universities, including Peking, Tsinghua, Fudan, Zhejiang, Nanjing and Shanghai Jiaotong Universities. Both Peking and Tsinghua, the two top ranked universities in China, were granted US\$225 million each over five years, while Nanjing and Shanghai Jiaotong each received US\$150 million for quality improvements. The second phase of the Project, launched in 2004, widened the number of universities to 36 (Ma, 2007). The Project reflects a conscious strategy to concentrate resources on a handful of institutions with the greatest potential for success in the international academic marketplace. Several universities have taken steps to consolidate their advantages, and are consciously planning to attain world-class status.

It was not accidental that attention paid to university rankings increased considerably when the cry for world-class universities was raised, especially since 2000, as shown by Table 1. While it takes quite some time to upload the text of publications to the web, the total number of Chinese articles on university rankings in 2008 had already reached 63 as I was revising this article (on 2 December 2008).

Table 1: Numbers of Chinese publications on university rankings, 1990-2007

	Year																	Total
	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	
No of articles	0	1	2	1	5	4	7	8	12	20	21	37	57	61	78	93	52	468
%	0	0.21	0.43	0.21	1.07	0.85	1.49	1.71	2.56	4.27	4.49	7.91	12.18	13.03	16.67	19.87	11.11	100

* Date retrieved December 2, 2008, from <http://cnki50.csis.com.tw/KNS50/Navigator.aspx?ID=CJFD>

Current university ranking practices

For decades after the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, Chinese universities were ranked by government agencies to enable the government to fund and administer the universities. Those rankings have been measured almost exclusively according to a single index of research output. Political consideration was also an important factor. For example, Xinjiang University was included in the list of key institutions because of its politically significant geographical location (Yang, 1998).

Current university rankings in China, however, are different and have new perspectives. They are conducted largely independently of the government, partially because of the central government's repeated unwillingness to support ranking exercises, and, more importantly, due to the demands from the market, focusing on factors such as institutional reputation and graduate employment (Luo, 2006). However, it is important to note that research performance still weighs substantially in all the rankings.

Since 1987, about 20 organisations have produced more than 30 university rankings in China (Liang, 2006). Seven of them are selected here based on their relatively strong influence and representativeness:

The Shanghai Jiaotong University rankings

Shanghai Jiaotong University produces annual rankings of world universities including a handful of Chinese institutions. Originally intended for a domestic audience, the rankings have received a great deal of attention both nationwide and internationally. The exercise does not rank universities holistically. Instead, its central focus is on research. This is based on a belief that the only data sufficiently reliable for the purpose of ranking are broadly available and internationally comparable data of measurable research performance, and that it is almost impossible to compare teaching and learning worldwide “owing to the huge differences between universities and the large variety of countries and because of the technical difficulties inherent in obtaining internationally comparable data” (Liu & Cheng, 2005: 133). The rankings try not to employ subjective measures of opinion or data sourced from universities themselves. An additional rationale for using research performance data is that arguably research is the most important single determinant of university reputation and widely accepted as merit based.

The major indicators employed by the rankings are publication and citation in the sciences, social sciences and humanities: 20% citation in leading journals; 20% articles in *Science* and *Nature*; and 20% the number of Thomson/ISI “HiCi” researchers on the basis of citation. Another 30% is determined by the winners of Nobel Prizes in the sciences and economics and Fields Medals in mathematics, in relation to their training (10%) and their current employment (20%). The remaining 10% is determined by dividing the total derived from the above data by the number of staff. The rankings show the dominant Chinese definition of academic quality: the ability of university faculty and researchers to produce and publish research, especially in the more technical and scientific fields. Fully 90% of the criteria used to measure academic quality are based on research output, peer citation and high-level recognition, particularly in the sciences, mathematics and related fields (Cheng & Liu, 2008: 66).

The Shanghai Jiaotong University index is far from without faults. The thrust of the criticism has been aimed at the ranking’s over-emphasis on scientific and technological research. It tells nothing about university activities other than research. In some respects, it is essentially historical, recording past achievements such as Nobel awards and Fields prizes for mathematics awarded decades ago rather than current activities. Furthermore, it lists only 500 universities and says little about the thousands of other universities except that they did not make it into top 500 (Holmes, 2006).

However, because the ranking is a benchmark for gauging progress in relation to international peers, it makes sense that the Chinese government is paying special attention to the disciplines that are high on its priority list and to which it is awarding priority funding. Since the first attempt in 2003, the exercise has now become a leading example of worldwide higher education rankings (Hazelkorn, 2008). While their influence is increasing, those in charge of the rankings acknowledge their bias against social sciences and the humanities and against the universities in non-English-speaking countries, and have indicated that the rankings are open to refinement and improvement (Cheng & Liu, 2008: 67–68).

The NetBig Rankings

NetBig.com is a foreign commercial entity. It provides the first consumer-oriented rankings of Chinese universities since 1999. The annual NetBig rankings rate Chinese institutions of higher education with degree-awarding powers. The rankings list institutions numerically in descending order according to their overall score. In 2007, 716 institutions were rated and listings were offered

on an overall ordinal scale as well as by specialisation (11 in total). NetBig uses a traditional weight-and-add approach in its ranking methodology, employing six different indicators:

1. prestige (based on the results of a survey sent out to academics, well-known scholars and university presidents – 368 out of 2,315 distributed questionnaires were returned and 358 were valid);
2. academic resources (number of master's and doctoral programmes per student, national key programmes and labs and centres per student, and national centres in social sciences per student);
3. research output (total and per faculty papers indexed by seven different indexes and databases including Science Citation Index [SCI], Engineering Index [EI], Social Science Citation Index [SSCI] and China Social Science Citation Index [CSSCI]);
4. student academic achievement (entrance examination scores, percentage of postgraduate students, placement rate of undergraduate and postgraduate students);
5. faculty (percentage of faculty with doctorates, percentage of professors, number of Chinese Academy of Science and Changjiang fellows, faculty-student ratio); and
6. infrastructure (research funding per faculty member, books per student, campus and facility size per student).

The top university is awarded an overall score of 100, and all universities thereafter are awarded a score as a percentage of the top university's score. The weighting for each category is: prestige (15%); academic resources (20%); research output (22%); student academic achievement (12%); faculty (19%); and infrastructure (12%) (Xie & Tong, 2006).

There have been some recent modifications to the calculation. The academic reputation indicator has been extended to include general reputation to reflect the general societal impact of a target university rather than merely its academic impact. Changes have also been made in the calculation of the academic resources indicator. Quantitative information related to the humanities and social sciences has been incorporated. For every piece of information, instead of the aggregate number for an entire school, the number is calculated in the proportion of per thousand students to mitigate the impact of pure scale so as to reflect academic quality and operational efficiency more accurately.

The NetBig rankers claim that their rankings help the ultimate consumer of education and serve as a useful guide in selecting an institution by presenting various statistics of different universities in China in a consolidated fashion, including their strengths and weaknesses. The principle is to be as objective, fair and scientific as possible. They claim that their perspective is the consumers' perspective, and their objective is to reflect the educational efficiency of the target universities. However, they acknowledge the risk of comparing apples with oranges, because of the matrix system of Chinese institutions with different specialties such as medicine and pharmacy, teacher training, agriculture, political sciences and law, forestry, arts, sports, and foreign languages (Li & Zhu, 2003). The rankers then justify their criteria and weighting of different measures of quality by stating that they have borrowed from the "renowned" American experience and reflect the US News rankings in that both rankings have been based on objective statistics complemented with the more subjective expert opinion.

The Guangdong Institute of Management Science rankings

First published in 1993, the Guangdong Institute of Management Science (GIMS) rankings have been published on an annual basis in the journal *Science and Management of Science and Technology* since 1995. The GIMS rankings take into account institutional research performance (43%) and also include indicators of educational performance (57%). The rankings list the top 100 institutions

overall as well as producing a number of rankings by specialisation. Educational performance is measured at the postgraduate level by the number of master's and doctoral graduates, and at the undergraduate level by the number of bachelor graduates. Research quality is measured in the sciences by research output and citations in a range of high-profile journals and indexes; also considered are patents and national and provincial awards. In the social sciences, paper indexes and citations are counted, as are national and provincial awards. The weightings are: education (57.09%, respectively 19.1% and 37.99% at postgraduate and undergraduate levels) and research (42.91%, respectively 34.74% and 8.17% for natural and social sciences) (Liang, 2006: 17).

Since 2000, the GIMS rankings have incorporated some modifications to the indicators. The rankings assess a variety of universities and colleges using the same quantitative indicators. The evaluation is based on both quantity and scale. Compared with national sciences, the social sciences and humanities weigh much less. Other emphases of the rankings include education, especially at undergraduate level, and services to society.

The Research Centre for China Science Evaluation rankings

Drawing data from government statistics, relevant research and citation databases from home and abroad, government and university websites, and related publications, books and newspapers, The Research Centre for China Science Evaluation (RCCSE) based at Wuhan University published its first ranking result in August 2004 (Li, 2007). It ranks institutions with postgraduate-level, degree-awarding powers. Universities are divided into two categories and ranked separately: the national key universities with intensive research programmes are ranked separately from all other universities that meet the necessary inclusion criterion. Like the Shanghai Jiaotong University rankings, the result of the RCCSE rankings often surprises the public with the low rankings of Chinese universities. For example, a recent rating list of universities around the world shows that nine of the ten best universities are in the United States. Peking University wins the top position for a Chinese university, ranked 192.

The RCCSE rankings use a complex set of criteria to rank universities, involving 50 different indicators grouped under four main criteria and 13 sub-criteria. The four main criteria and their weightings in the key university rankings are: resources (16.71%); education (26.16%); research (45.31%); and reputation (11.82%). For non-key universities, the criteria and sub-criteria focus more on education and resources than on research in comparison with the ranking for key universities. The main criteria and weightings are as follows: resources (25.99%); education (41.26%); and research (32.75%) (Xie & Tong, 2006: 34).

The rankings evaluate the overall competitiveness of universities and of the disciplines within universities covering the social sciences and humanities, and science and technology. They divide all universities and colleges across China into six categories: comprehensive and minority ethnicities; colleges of agriculture, science and technology; teacher training; medicine; foreign languages, economy and law; and sports, culture and art education. Schools or departments within each category are ranked according to two specific criteria: attainments in scientific and technological innovation; and competitiveness in human and social science research (Li, 2007).

The RCCSE rankings produced China's first list involving assessments from non-governmental organisations. Both the idea and the design of the rankings were somewhat innovative. Except for those of the reputation of national key universities, quantitative indicators have been employed in all the other dimensions. However, some indicators are difficult to quantify, while the reliability of many others is questionable. In the assessment of disciplinary strengths, emphases are on output and quality in the social sciences and the humanities, and on investment and application in science and technology. Since 2005, RCCSE also produces ranking lists of the competitiveness of China's private universities and colleges and of post graduate training provided by Chinese universities. The

scale of the whole exercise is large, covering a variety of higher education institutions and disciplines (Xie & Tong, 2006).

The Chinese University Alumni Association rankings

The Chinese University Alumni Association (CUAA) published its university ranking results in 2003. The CUAA rankings and weightings were originally determined from the results of an online survey. The alumni association publishes its findings on its website. Its researchers employ a similar weight-and-add approach to other Chinese university rankings. The rankings used six main criteria with 35 indicators in 2003. The indicators have been modified since 2005. In 2007, there were three main criteria including research (48.89%), education (44.44%) and reputation (6.67%), nine sub-criteria covering research infrastructure (15.56%), research projects (13.33%), research outputs (20%), academic programmes (11.11%), faculty profile (13.33%), students (20%), and reputation (6.67%) including the reputation with the national higher education system such as Projects 211 and 985 (2.22%) and social reputation including recognition, attraction and influence (4.45%) (Meng & Tong, 2008).

While indicators of teachers and students weigh substantially, research remains the most important dimension. The indicators of the CUAA rankings cover a wide range. Although they have included reputation, the overall focus is still on objective indicators. Another emphasis of the rankings is social service. There are some obvious overlaps among indicators, and a number of indicators need to be further defined.

The Shanghai Institute of Educational Science rankings

The Shanghai Institute of Educational Science (SIES) published its first ranking list in 2003 of 539 Chinese regular higher education institutions, evaluated by their degree-awarding capacity and divided into five separately ranked divisions: arts and science; engineering; teacher education; medicine; and finance and law. Major indicators used for this study include: total enrolment; the percentage of postgraduate students; the number of international students; the percentage of faculty with doctorates; ratio of full professors to every 1,000 students; education expenditure per student; total and per capita faculty research grants; the number of national key programmes; the number of national education awards; and the number of national doctoral thesis prizes (Xie & Tong, 2006).

The indicators of the SIES rankings are comprehensive yet clearly defined with reasonable reliability. Nearly all indicators are quantitative, with an increasing shift from overall to per capita quantity. The evaluation focuses particularly on resources and investment. The rankings aimed at exploring higher education evaluation and university ranking more generally, and at providing Chinese regular higher education institutions with a platform for sharing information about their operation. As there is no weighting of indicators, the rankings are conducted according to each criterion. They do not have the central indicators that usually favour the massive research universities such as SCI. As the rankers have claimed, their goal is to serve university reforms and encourage universities to learn from each other's experience (Li, 2007).

The China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre rankings

The China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre (CDGDC) is affiliated to the MOE. While its rankings do not necessarily represent the Ministry's official stand, the rankings appear to be treated much more authoritatively by many Chinese higher education institutions, compared with the other six rankings. Since its establishment in July 1994, CDGDC has been commissioned by the State Council Academic Degrees Committee to evaluate the postgraduate

education provided by the 33 graduate schools at Chinese higher education institutions in six categories including comprehensive, science and technology, medicine, teacher training, social sciences and the humanities, and agriculture and forestry (Li & Zhu, 2003).

The CDGDC researchers ranked postgraduate programmes and published its first ranking result in 2002 (Xie & Tong, 2006). There have been two attempts to conduct ranking exercises, with the second rankings completed by 2003. The ranking results are listed as one overall ranking and others according to each criterion. Since 1995, the Centre has evaluated the 259 doctoral programmes nationwide in mathematics, chemistry, mechanics, electronic engineering, and computer science and technology. Since 2002, the scale of evaluation further expanded to 1,336 programmes at 229 higher education institutions (Li, 2007).

As of 2004, university departments in a total of 80 majors had been ranked according to four different criteria: faculty profile (15%); research performance (35%); education (25%); and reputation (25%). For each major, scores out of 100 are awarded for each criterion in addition to an overall institution score (Xie & Tong, 2006). The rankings also list top universities for each specialisation under each major field of study. Similar to all other rankings in China, research weighs heavily, covering infrastructure, awards, patents, publications, and grants. Most indicators require both the overall quantity and per capita number or proportion.

Issues of concern

Since the first university league table was produced in 1987, there have been more than 30 rankings in China, none of which has been immune from criticism. Meanwhile, there appears to be less concern from the public about university rankings than there was in the past. Chinese universities have been burdened with so many problems that the rankings no longer matter that much. Jilin University ranks 382 on the list produced by RCCSE, making it one of the eight Chinese universities among the top 400 world universities. But this university recently shocked the country by announcing its three billion yuan (US\$384.6 million) debt. The announcement triggered a national investigation to check the assets of the universities. The university managers, the faculty, the officials and those concerned about higher education are divided on the heavy debts of universities, academic frauds and the mechanisms for managing universities. Chinese universities have been encouraged by officials or localities to expand quickly as a manifestation of local administrative performance. As a result, they have to rely on the administration for more resources to support their expansion. This produces problems. To ensure the sound growth of higher education, the key issues should be academic freedom, the pursuit of a humanist spirit and the search for truth through scientific research. These concerns are not likely to be reflected in simple rankings. For example, an online poll among 27,870 people in July 2004 showed that only 10% of those interviewed considered the RCCSE rankings "correct and objective" (*China Daily*, 2007, April 12).

There have been a number of concerns about the rankings, at ideological, institutional and technical levels. Firstly, ranking universities is necessarily related to educational quality. Different rankings systems are driven by different purposes and are associated with different notions of what constitutes university quality (Van Dyke, 2005; Usher & Savino, 2006). To accept the ranking systems is to acquiesce to particular definitions and purposes of higher education. For example, higher education is scientific research in the Shanghai Jiaotong rankings (Marginson, 2007). In China, it is clear that the current rankings facilitate the dominance of elite education in the whole Chinese higher education system constituted of institutions of strikingly different categories. While citations do not assess the quality of vocational training institutions accurately, graduate employment is not a suitable indicator for research universities (Pan, 2006).

More than 95% of China's higher education institutions are provincial (Yang, 2004). They are in sharp contrast to their prestigious national key peers in almost every aspect, especially in terms of resources, staffing and students. China's current higher education development strategy is twofold:

building world-class universities and promoting massification. The latter relies mainly on provincial institutions. University rankings should help to guide provincial institutions to foster their own identities rather than pushing them to ape research universities. Current university ranking practices obviously serve the latter much better, and have largely ignored the critical importance of diversity for a modern higher education system (Bok, 1990).

Secondly, it is ironic that Chinese universities are not assessed mainly by their performance in education. This is not China-specific. As pointed out by Dill and Soo (2005), assessments of teaching and learning process get much less attention compared with research and financial resources in the major rankings in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. While it is true that research performance weighs considerably less in domestic university rankings, in contrast to international competitions (Marginson, 2007), research remains one of the most critical roles in all rankings in China. In this sense, the league tables produced by the above rankings represent research assessment of the ranked universities.

In general, the indicators employed in Chinese university rankings all have their own features, and cover a wide range. Five of the above seven rankings have adopted a reputation indicator. Overall, the rankings are mainly quantitative, relying on objective indicators, and favour the massive research intensive universities. As most of them are still modifying their indicator systems and calculation methods, and their definitions of the same indicators often differ considerably, it is difficult to find shared core indicators. Nevertheless, research including infrastructure, researchers, outputs and citations is always the most prominent.

Thirdly, many people have raised the issue of insufficient weight placed on the social sciences and humanities (Zhao et al., 2008). This disadvantages universities that have been traditionally strong in these areas. Renmin University of China, Beijing Foreign Studies University and the Central Conservatory of Music, for example, have been consistently ranked very poorly. This again is not a China-specific issue, as pointed out by Marginson (2007).

Fourthly, China's practice of university ranking is also a result of international policy borrowing in a context of a neo-liberal imaginary of globalisation that designates certain power relations, practices and technologies as playing a hegemonic role in organising and decoding the meaning of the world. It illustrates China's use of the foreign to justify and legitimate what is being done locally. Chinese university rankings frequently cite foreign practices such as the US News & World Report, America's Best College, *The Times* Good University Guide and the Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities to justify their exercises (Luo, 2006), without fully understanding the fact that these rankings have been strongly criticised both within their countries and internationally.

Fifthly, as in all university rankings, the powerful clarity of league tables of Chinese universities conceals a whole array of methodological problems and anomalies, which profoundly affect the validity of particular rankings. This should be taken into account when considering the practical implications of the rankings. While it is beyond reproach that university rankings emerge as a response to demand from the general public, it is questionable that many university presidents cite the ranking results that are "friendly" to their institutions and choose to ignore unfavourable ones. It is even more questionable that it is not unusual that some institutions manipulate data central to the league table rankings (Pan, 2006: 7), a phenomenon that is certainly not found in China only (Stecklow, 1995; Ehrenberg, 2002).

As in many parts of the world, university rankings arouse enormous interest in China. The exercises look rather dubious in many ways and some negative side effects have become apparent. While they need to be supplemented with other forms of assessment and should not be the basis for policy decisions, they cannot be ignored. Indeed, more and more Chinese parents and students refer to them to select higher institutions (Zhang & Ye, 2007). They have even become a driver of policy and institutional strategy. For example, a number of universities, including Hebei University of Technology, Hebei Polytechnic University, Wuhan Institute of Technology, Jiangnan Petroleum Institute (now part of Yangtze University), and Central South University, have taken measures to

improve their rankings, based explicitly on the major indicators employed by most of the above ranking systems (Li, 2007: 31).

End remarks

University rankings in China have resulted from the altered relationship between universities and governments. They originally emerged to meet the demand from customers. As the exercise increases, a variety of forces have been involved and have had influence. While the Chinese government claims it does not support any rankings, the fact that it has never attempted to stop any of them reflects its tacit consent to the exercise. This becomes understandable given the increasing emphasis in public policy making on information provision as a means of assuring academic quality in higher education. As market competition in higher education becomes more common in China, the Chinese government is hoping to adopt strategies of information provision as a means of assuring academic quality. University league tables are seen as a useful way to provide student consumers with much needed information and to inform universities and policymakers on areas that need improvement (Dill & Soo, 2005).

In the development of university ranking in China during the past two decades, visible shifts have been from a narrow central focus on public objective research indicators, especially in science and technology areas, to an overall assessment with a combination of natural, technological and social sciences incorporating subjective indicators such as reputation (Tong, 2002). There are no signs to show that China, at least in the near future, will secure 'clean' rankings that are transparent, free of self-interest and methodologically coherent, and that generate an across-the-board dynamic of improvement (Marginson, 2007).

The rankings in China emerged to strike a balance between the over centralisation by the state and the lack of control over "social forces" (Luo, 2006). Due to some superficial adoption of foreign practices and modifications that are based on de-institutionalisation, they have lost their original institutional meaning on one hand, and failed to indigenise themselves according to China's actuality on the other. As a measure that could have benefitted China's higher education system, the rankings have now become shallow, distorted and misleading. Therefore, they should be approached with great caution.

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