The Quest for World Class Universities in China: critical reflections

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ABSTRACT Building world-class universities has become a national policy priority in China since then-President Jiang Zemin announced in May 1998 that China must have several world-class universities of international advanced level. This article aims to offer critical reflections on the policy in relation to building world-class universities in China. It begins by introducing the policy context of China’s world-class universities initiatives. Then, it examines Chinese perceptions of world-class universities, and assesses the related policy options adopted by the government and universities. It concludes that the formation and implementation of the policy of building the world-class universities in China reflects the ambition of both the Chinese government and Chinese universities to develop high quality higher education in the context of globalization and the knowledge-based economy.

Introduction
As China’s economic capacity increases with its persistent and rapid economic growth, the Chinese leadership is eager to earn an international reputation in the field of higher education. In doing so, one strategy is to build world-class universities in China in a relatively short term. On 4 May 1998, then President Jiang Zemin announced that China must have several world-class universities of international advanced level. Immediately, building world-class universities became a national policy priority in China. Since then, ‘world-class universities’ has become a catchphrase in China, and a few selected top Chinese universities launched their own plans to transform themselves into world-class institutions. This article aims to offer critical reflections on the policy in relation to building world-class universities in China. It begins by introducing the policy context of China’s world-class universities initiatives. Then, it examines Chinese perceptions of world-class universities, and assesses the related policy options adopted by the government and universities. The article concludes that the formation and implementation of the policy of building world-class universities in China reflects the ambition of both the Chinese government and Chinese universities to develop high-quality higher education in the context of globalization and the knowledge-based economy. Given the dominant role played by the Chinese government in building world-class universities in China, this article argues that money alone cannot bring about world-class universities in China. To build China’s world-class universities entails the reshaping of state–university relationships and restructuring of university governance in China. Without academic freedom and university autonomy, it is hard for Chinese universities to be world-class institutions.
The Policy Context for Developing World-Class Universities in China

Making use of education and science to push forward China’s modernization has been a long-term policy option for the post-Mao Chinese leadership. Along with the implementation of economic reforms and the ‘open-door’ policy, the post-Mao Chinese leaders began to recognize the important contribution that education can make to both economic growth and social development. For the purpose of producing enough educated human resources for economic modernization, an ‘economic ideology of education’ was developed by the post-Mao Chinese leaders. Under this ideology, education and economic development are inseparable and interactive. In the views of the Chinese leaders, education is the essential tool for economic modernization, and must meet the needs of China’s modernizing economy and its future development (Chen, 1999, p. 8). With China’s further integration with the world economy, the Chinese leadership has realized that China’s future is based on a high technology knowledge economy, and that the international competitiveness of the state will depend upon educational development and scientific technology as well as the degree of knowledge innovation (Ministry of Education [MOE], 1998).

To establish world-class universities in China has become a strategic objective pursued by both Chinese universities and the government since the mid-1990s. Its formulation and implementation is the product of the post-Mao efforts of education reform. In order to inject new momentum into the Chinese education system, the post-Mao Chinese government launched its first educational restructuring in May 1985 when the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP) issued the ‘Decision on the Reform of the Educational System’. The Decision declared the building up of an appropriate higher education system with all kinds of disciplines and a size compatible with China’s economic power by the end of the twentieth century.

In autumn 1992, at the CCP’s 14th National Congress, then General Secretary Jiang Zemin proclaimed that ‘it is essential for China to shift the economic construction to the track of depending on advancement of science and technology and the improvement of the quality of laborers’. In February 1993, the Chinese authorities issued the ‘Programme for Education Reform and Development in China’, in which the Chinese government determined to focus all kinds of forces from the central and local governments on about 100 key universities and a batch of key academic disciplines and specialties, and enable them to reach a higher level in terms of education quality, research and management at the beginning of the new century. In May 1995, the CCP and the State Council, the cabinet of China, jointly promulgated the Decision to Speed up the Advancement of Science and Technology, and decided to carry out the strategy of ‘revitalizing China through developing science and education’ (jiaoxingguo). Under these circumstances, the State Council launched the ‘211 Project’ in 1995 (Zhou, 2006, p. 36). Meanwhile, the 211 Project was included in the newly formulated ‘Ninth Five-Year (1996-2000) Plan’ as the sole national key construction programme in the education sector. Since then, a huge sum of earmarked money has been appropriated by the central government to finance the 211 Project. With the intensified investment in universities, the overall conditions of China’s higher education sector have been improved since the mid-1990s.

Encouraged by the development of China’s higher education under the 211 Project, the leaders of the Chinese government planned to lift a few top universities to the world-class level. On 4 May 1998, in his speech at the ceremony celebrating the centenary of Peking University, then President Jiang Zemin asserted that China must have several first-rate universities of advanced international level. In December 1998, in the ‘Action Plan to Vitalize Education in the 21st Century’, a policy document promulgated by the Ministry of Education, the Chinese government affirmed that a few key universities in China already had the conditions to be world-class universities in terms of their research capacity, quality of professors, and quality of undergraduates. So, the state decided to concentrate the limited resources to develop them into world-class universities within 10 or 20 years.

Without doubt, building a few first-rate universities in China is the pet policy of Jiang Zemin, the former President and Party Secretary General. However, such a policy is also a product of higher education development in post-Mao China. The scale of Chinese higher education has been expanded steadily since the late 1970s. In 1997, the gross enrolment ratio in China was 9.1%, but it increased to 9.8%, 10.5% and 11% respectively in 1998, 1999 and 2000 (National Center for Education Development Research, 2001, p. 11). In 1999, the intake of regular higher education
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Institutions was 1.53 million, representing a 42% increase from 1.08 million in 1998. In the following years, quantitative growth continued. In 2000, the intake of higher education institutions reached 2.2 million, almost double the intake in 1998. In 2001, a total of 2,682,800 first-year students enrolled in 1225 regular tertiary institutions (MOE, 2002). With the extension of the scale of higher education in China, it is natural for China to develop a few key universities to the world-class level so as to increase the quality of education and research of Chinese higher learning institutions.

On the whole, the formation of the policy of building world-class universities in China reflects the ambition of both the Chinese government and Chinese universities to develop high-quality higher education in the context of globalization and the knowledge-based economy. Given the fierce international economic competition and China’s rising international role, to establish world-class universities in China would be regarded as one of the strategic priorities for China to compete in the global economy. As Min Weifang, the Party Secretary of Peking University argues, ‘[A]mid today’s acute competition on the international scene, universities are a major factor affecting a country’s key competitive ability. Thus creating and running world-class universities should be one of the strategic foci of building up a country’ (Min, 2004, p. 8).

The Dominant Role of the Government in Building World-Class Universities in China: from the ‘211 Project’ to the ‘985 Scheme’

As a national priority for higher education development in the new millennium, the 211 Project aims to achieve remarkable improvements in teaching, research, administration, and efficiency in 100 institutions of higher education and in certain key disciplinary areas in the twenty-first century. Primarily aiming at training high-level professional manpower to implement the national strategy for social and economic development, the Project has impacts on the following areas: improving higher education; accelerating national economic progress; pushing forward the development of science, technology and culture; enhancing China’s overall capacity and international competitiveness; and laying the foundation of training high-level professional manpower mainly within the educational institutions at home. It is envisaged that after several years’ efforts some of these universities will have greatly improved their quality of education, research, management and institutional efficiency. In addition, these institutions will also have made remarkable progress in reforming their management and thus become bases for training high-level professional manpower and for solving major problems for the country’s economic construction and social development (China Education Daily, 7 December 2001).

The 211 Project represents the most ambitious goal of the Chinese government in higher education development since 1949. It is expected that after the completion of the Project, the selected group of universities will set up national standards in overall quality, with some of the key universities and disciplinary areas approaching or reaching the advanced international standards. During the Ninth Five-Year Plan period, the central government endorsed 99 universities to be developed under the 211 Project. In addition, 602 projects were selected for the development of key fields of study. A total sum of 10.894 billion yuan was collected for these purposes from both the central government and local governments (Zhou, 2006, p. 38).

The government proclaimed that the first phase of the 211 Project (1996-2000) has achieved its goals and yielded major results and returns. A number of universities and key disciplinary fields have been developed, and the overall situation of higher education has been improved. A national higher education digital information platform was built (Zhou, 2006, pp. 38-39). The second phase of the Project started in 2001 with the tasks to continue building key universities and developing key fields of study, and bringing some of them to advanced international standards.

Along with the implementation of the 211 Project, and more importantly, the increasing improvement of the financial situation of the central government as a result of the rapid economic growth, some main beneficiaries of the 211 Project, for instance, Peking University and Tsinghua University, began to think about how to reach the ranks of world-class universities with the help of the central government. In this regard, Peking University, whose history can be traced back to 1898, was taking a lead. It was said that early in 1994, Peking University had expressed its intention to transform itself into a world-class institution. As its centenary ceremony approached, Peking
University reported to central government its ambition to be a world-class university, and ensured a positive response from the top leaders, especially Jiang Zemin.

On 2 May 1998, Li Lanqing, then Vice Premier in charge of education policy, expressed explicitly for the first time that China should build up a batch of world-class universities when he delivered a speech at the ‘Forum of Presidents of World Famous Universities’ organized by Peking University as part of its centenary festival. Two days later, Li's words were echoed by then President Jiang Zemin when he made a speech at a ceremony celebrating the centenary of Peking University. As President Jiang first made such the proposal of building up world-class university in May 1998, such a policy was also named the ‘985 Scheme’.

The core of the ‘985 Scheme’ is to build a few world-class universities in China. As Jiang Zemin put, the goal of the 985 Scheme is to build up a few world-class universities in China for China's modernization. Compared with the 211 Project, the 985 Scheme has a narrower policy. While the former aims to improve the overall quality of Chinese higher education, the latter targets a few top universities in China. First, Peking and Tsinghua Universities have been handpicked by the central government to be developed into world-class institutions. With the implementation of the 985 Scheme in 1999, Peking and Tsinghua universities both received 1.8 billion yuan (US$225 million) in the first round of special 985 funding within three successive years from 1999. The huge sum of extra money received by these two universities arrested attention from other key universities, which also asked to join the 985 Scheme. From July to November 1999, another seven universities joined the 985 Scheme: University of Science and Technology of China, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Nanjing University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Zhejiang University and Harbin Institute of Technology (Zhou, 2006, p. 40). Later, the list was extended. By the year of 2006, a total of 37 universities had joined the 985 Scheme. Except for Peking and Tsinghua, the universities are awarded special funds by both central government and the local governments where they are located. For example, Fudan, Zhejiang, and Nanjing Universities received 1.2 billion yuan (US$150 million) each in the first phase of the 985 Scheme.

The second phase of the 985 Scheme started in 2004 and lasted till 2007. According to the Ministry of Education, the second phase of the 985 Scheme has the following tasks: to consolidate the results achieved and the foundations laid in the first phase for developing world-class universities; to explore actively ways and means to build a modern university system by innovating in the higher education administrative system and its operational mechanisms; to cultivate new talents and bring in world-class academic leaders individually or by groups and allow them to come and go of their own accord, so as to accelerate the development of academic and research fields where China is strong in the world; to build national science-technology innovation platforms and national centers for innovation in humanities and social sciences part of a national innovation system; and to hasten the emergence of world-class academic programmes and the optimization of the composition of these programmes (Zhou, 2006, p. 43).

**World-Class Universities: China’s perceptions**

Though China has formulated and implemented the policy of building world-class universities, what are world-class universities is still a problem without a clear answer. Many people, especially university leaders, have contributed to the definition of a world-class university. According to Philip Altbach, Monan Professor of Higher Education and director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, a world-class university should have the following characteristics: (1) excellence in research; (2) excellent faculty with job security, appropriate salaries and benefits, and adequate facilities; (3) academic freedom and an atmosphere of intellectual excitement; (4) freedom to pursue knowledge; (5) a significant measure of internal self-governance; and (6) consistent and substantial public financial support (Altbach, 2004).

In order to build world-class universities in China, both the Chinese government and Chinese universities have made great efforts to identify the characteristics of world-class universities. Since 1998 when such a policy was initiated, many forums, seminars, even international conferences have been conducted in China to explore what world-class universities mean. In the section, we will explore China’s perception of the world-class university. As Jiang Zemin was the first top Chinese leader to initiate the policy of building first-rate universities in China, his perception of a first-rate
university may be a useful reference. In his speech at Peking University in May 1998, Jiang tried to outline the basic character of the first-rate universities in terms of education quality. As Jiang put, first-rate universities should (1) train high-level creative talent, (2) turn out high-standard, original research results, and (3) make outstanding major contributions to society (People's Daily, 5 May 1998).

Apparently, Jiang's intention is not to give a clear-cut definition of a world-class university, but to highlight some general directions for building first-class universities in China. To explore the concept, nature and characteristics of world-class universities, the first nine top universities, which are among the first and second batch of universities supported by the 985 Scheme, have launched a series of annual academic seminars on the Theory and Practice of Establishing First-Class Universities. Started at Tsinghua University in March 2003, this seminar series has been held respectively at Shanghai Jiaotong University in April 2004, at Nanjing University in May 2005 and at the University of Science and Technology of China in September 2006. At each seminar, presidents or vice-presidents from these nine universities and well-known scholars from higher educational theoretical circles expressed their opinions on what are and how to build up world-class universities. Their discussion covered different aspects of building up world-class universities, especially on the dimensions such as disciplines, teachers, students, administration and equipment.

To promote the academic research on world-class universities, a research centre for world-class universities was set up by the Ministry of Education at Shanghai Jiaotong University in April 2005. The research centre is based on the Research Institute of Higher Education of Jiaotong University, and is one the strategic research bases of the Ministry. From 2001 to 2005, this centre has produced 15 research reports on the theories and practices of building world-class universities.

Chinese literature on world-class universities shows that a consensus has been reached among the Chinese higher education community on the basic requirements of world-class universities. World-class universities should have first-class academic disciplines, a first-class teaching contingent, first-class student sources, first-class talent training, first-class scientific research results, first-class administrative and operating mechanisms, powerful financial strengths and material and technological foundation, state-of-art equipment, and make outstanding contributions to the country and to social development (Min, 2004, p. 11; Tsinghua University Educational Research Institute, 2004, pp. 27-28).

However, not all the requirements have the same weight. Some highlight the importance of excellent teachers and talented students, some focus on first-class disciplines, some stress the financial capacity of the university, and some emphasize the first-rate research results. For example, Xu Zhihong, President of Peking University, stresses the role of outstanding professors in building up world-class universities because a pool of world-renowned professors can bring along new academic ideas for universities, and input new dynamics for the country's development. Xu argues that the university is a place full of grand masters (dashi), and the university is meaningless without grand masters. Therefore, the key for Peking University to be a world-class university is first-rate talent; that is, a corps of high-quality professors (China Education Daily, 10 August 2004). Zhu Qingshi, President of the University of Science and Technology of China, China's top university of science and technology, expressed the same viewpoint. Making extensive references to the American case, Zhu argued that the way to become a world-class university is to invite in the world's best people and give them full support and the best conditions (Zhu, 2004, p. 21).

What is worth noting is that the presidents of Chinese universities have placed much attention on the role of university spirit and academic freedom in establishing world-class universities. They pinpointed that the most fundamental work in establishing a first-class university consists of forging the university's spirit and soul, clearly defining the university's school-operating conception, and shaping a rich and unique campus cultural foundation for the university (Tsinghua University Educational Research Institute, 2004, p. 28). Min Weifang, professor of education and Party Secretary of Peking University, highlighted the importance of academic freedom, a taboo in China's universities. Given the fact that unpopular, even Marxist, scholars gain tenure in the United States, and the historical experiences of Beijing University, especially under the leadership of Cai Yuanpei, Min argued that the freedom of academics must be protected; and scholars must be given latitude to seek the truth, and a relaxed academic environment must be created for them. He complained that too much attention is directed to how to build up an excellent contingent of
teachers, how to gain abundant finances and construct a first-class infrastructure, but not enough attention is paid to the academic environment, academic spirit, and university culture that first-class universities should have.

On top of academic freedom and university spirit, Min Weifang also emphasized the role of the school-operating conception in building up a world-class university. For Min, though the international competition for talent is acute, there is also a more deep-seated competition – the competition of administrative systems and operating systems. Without the creation of corresponding systems and environments that truly enable them to bring potentials into full play, it is difficult for the university to retain the talented personnel recruited from all parts of the world.

Min’s argument is followed by many colleagues. For example, Ji Baocheng, president of Renmin University of China, China’s top university of social sciences, insists that a world-class university should have three essentials, i.e. scholarly masters, advanced hardware, and a free and tolerant academic ambience (China Education Daily, 10 August 2004). Gu Binglin, President of Tsinghua University, also argues that world-class universities should create a progressive campus culture and spiritual ambience (China Education Daily, 10 August 2004).

As a president from a technology-oriented university, Zhu Qingshi emphasized the importance of construction of first-class discipline in building world-class universities. He said that all first-class universities have a certain number of disciplines that are first class, but that there are no first-class universities where the disciplines are necessarily all first class. Zhu even argued that China needs many different kinds of ‘first-class universities’, not just those that are focused on research and the training of high-level specialized talent. There should be a division of labor so that research-oriented universities should not be compelled to expand their enrolment, and those that are not research oriented should not seek first-class status by emulating the existing elite research institutions (Zhu, 2004, pp. 21-26).

Building World-Class Universities: China’s strategies

History shows that the status of world-class universities in all countries is not created by a single effort. Many factors have contributed to the development of first-class universities. As building up world-class universities is a national will to raise China’s core international competitive ability, how to construct world-class universities is not a matter that concerns a small minority of universities, but rather the national policy and national strategy. Therefore, we can examine China’s strategies to establish world-class universities from two dimensions: the state strategies and university strategies. For the state, the main strategy is to concentrate, through policy and administrative tools, limited resources on a few key universities to turn them into world-class universities, and provide financial and policy support to the target universities to achieve leaps in progress. For universities, many strategies have been adopted, such as, recruiting talented people worldwide, transforming personnel systems and school operating systems, and promoting internationalization, and so on. By comparison, the Chinese government has a bigger role to play in the movement to build up world-class universities in China.

The State Strategies: extensive use of financial and administrative tools

The key strategy for the Chinese government to build world-class universities is to invest huge sums of extra money in target universities through launching national programmes such as the 211 Project and the 985 Scheme. Both central ministries and local government have been mobilized to raise funds for these programmes.

Under the 211 Project, from 1996 to 2000, more than 10 billion yuan extra money was invested in 99 universities. With the implementation of the 985 Scheme in 1999, Peking University and Tsinghua University received 1.8 billion yuan extra money respectively in the successive three years since 1999. Afterwards, several non Beijing-based top universities requested strongly to join the 985 Scheme and gain extra money from the central government. Obviously, the central government alone cannot afford to sponsor more universities. Given the financial limitations and the pressure from universities, the central government decided to involve local government in the campaign. Provincial governments were allowed to build key universities located in their regions.
into world-class universities if financial resources were available. As a result, with the financial sponsorship from both the central and local governments, more key universities become the beneficiaries of the 985 Scheme. In 1999, seven non-Beijing-based universities were included in the list of building world-class universities. By the end of 2000, 30 universities were included in the list.

The list is still extending as more local governments are involved in fund raising. In 2001, with the support from Guangdong provincial government, two Guangzhou-based universities, Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU) and South China University of Technology (SCUT), joined the list. In accordance with the agreements between the Ministry and Guangdong provincial government, earmarked money of 300 million yuan and 200 million yuan from the Ministry of Education would be invested in SYSU and SCUT respectively in the three successive years from 2001. In the same period, 900 million and 200 million yuan from Guangdong provincial government should be invested in SYSU and SCUT respectively. That means the two universities would gain 1.6 billion yuan from both the central and local governments. From 1999 to 2002, the central government invested in total 12.6 billion yuan in the 985 Scheme to build world-class universities.

By the end of 2006, there was a total of 37 universities under the 985 Project. Among them, six are located in Beijing. With the backing of the 985 Scheme, the relevant universities are in a better position to recruit top talent from home and abroad, and to improve faculty quality, to launch new research projects and improve facilities and laboratories. In order to make better use of the limited higher education resources and increase the competitiveness of the higher education sector, the Chinese government employed administrative tools to optimize educational funds through institutional mergers and cooperation between institutions in sharing resources. Institutional merger is also seen as a way to readjust the strategic structure of higher education institutions. Since the mid-1990s, institutional amalgamation has been a remarkable trend in China’s higher education sector. By 1998, 207 institutions had been merged into 84 (China Education Daily, 2 May 1998).

Through merger, the number of higher education institution has been decreased. At the same time, cross-institutional consortiums or super-universities were established by merging multidisciplinary universities/colleges and the alliance between universities. The establishment of new Zhejiang University in 1998 was a significant case for the restructuring of higher education institutions in China. It was established on the basis of the merger of Zhejiang University, Hangzhou University, Zhejiang Agricultural University and Zhejiang Medical University. As a multidisciplinary university, its programmes cover arts, humanities, education, economics, management, law, agriculture, sciences, engineering and medicine. In addition, there are national laboratories, research centres, and post-doctoral stations at the university. By transforming it into a multidisciplinary university, the merger was successful in making Zhejiang University one of the leading universities, both in terms of size and diversity. In 2000, Beijing Medical University was merged with Peking University.

On top of institutional mergers, the Chinese government also made use of its administrative measures to promote the development of key academic disciplines in universities so as to improve the capacities of Chinese universities in training high-quality professionals and building up their academic and research strength. The term ‘key academic programmes’ refers to university teaching programmes which are given the top priority for development by the government. Although the plan to choose key academic programmes started in the mid 1980s, the 211 Project gave great impetus to this plan as the government aimed to develop first-rate academic programmes in China. In 2001, the Ministry of Education launched another round of evaluating and selecting state-class key academic programmes. In 2002, the Ministry ratified a list of 964 key university academic programmes (Zhou, 2006, pp. 45-46). These officially selected key academic programmes are qualified to gain extra money from the government.

For the purpose of improving the research performance of humanities and social sciences in China, the Ministry of Education issued the Plan to Build up Key National Bases for Humanities and Social Sciences Research in Regular Higher Education Institutions in June 1999. The plan includes a selection of about 100 leading research centres in universities nationwide. Universities which host these research centres are given extra funds and research grants to launch new research projects so as to enhance their overall research capacity and improve their international reputation in the fields of humanities and social sciences. The key national bases have become the focus of
university competition. The more such key bases are hosted, the higher the reputation a university enjoys. In fact, top universities, such as Peking University, Renmin University, and Fudan University, have hosted more such bases. Since 1999, the Ministry has established 106 key research bases in philosophy and social sciences. In order to build key research bases, train and reward talent, and reform social science education, the Ministry of Education initiated the Programme for the Prosperity of Philosophy and Social Sciences in Higher Education Institutions in 2003 (Zhou, 2006, p. 131). These policy initiatives have had a great impact on the development of the humanities and social sciences in China.

The same programme was also launched in the field of science and technology. In order to enhance the basic research level, the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Finance launched the Programme of National Key Laboratories in 1984. Such a programme was extended in the mid-1990s as the Ministry of Education and local governments set up their own key laboratories within their jurisdiction. By the end of 2003, there were in total 161 national key laboratories operating in China involving more than 50000 researchers and with assets worth 3 billion yuan. Every year, these laboratories can raise 2 billion yuan in research grants (China Education Daily, 24 December 2004).

In order to bring in more outstanding professors for the top universities under the 985 Scheme and the 211 Project, the Ministry of Education as well as the State Bureau of Foreign Experts launched the Programme for Introducing Disciplinary Talents to Universities in 2006. The aim of the Programme is to bring about 1000 academic grand masters to China from the top 100 universities or research institutions all over the world and establish about 100 world-class disciplinary innovation bases. Hence, this programme is also named the ‘111 Programme’. Academic disciplines covered by this Programme consist of mainly science, technology, engineering, and management. In 2006, 23 universities under the 985 Scheme became the first batch of beneficiaries of this Programme (China Education and Research Network, 2006).

Prior to the 111 Programme, the MOE had already started or implemented several other plans to attract, select and train outstanding scholars. For example, in 1993, the Ministry of Education set up the ‘Cross-Century Plan for Training Outstanding Talent’, which aims to discover and train academic leaders in various disciplines. By the end of 2002, the plan had selected a total of 922 young scholars from more than 100 universities. Another programme is ‘Financial Support for Outstanding Young Professors’, which awarded 2218 returning professors a total of 144 million yuan up to 2003. In 1998, with the financial help from Li Kashing, a tycoon in Hong Kong, the Ministry of Education set up the ‘Changjiang Scholars Award Scheme’ which provides the selected outstanding returned scholars with an annual salary of more than 1 million yuan. From 2001 to 2005, this scheme rewarded 444 special and lecturing professors (Zhou, 2006, p. 122). With the rapid economic growth and the increasing state comprehensive capacity, the Chinese government hopes China will be a magnet for expatriate human capital, attracting talents that previously stayed overseas. Since the coming of the new century, the governments at all levels have been active in encouraging the return of overseas scholars to China, cultivating a favorable political climate and culture for repatriating scholars, and providing funding to attract returnees.

Although the Chinese government has spent a large sum of money on talent recruitment, questions have been raised about the quality of these recruits. It seems that China has not been successful in attracting the return of its best and brightest. The data collected by David Zweig, Professor at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, reveal that, in terms of international reputation and prestige, few returning scholars are of comparable quality to those who stay abroad (Zweig, 2006). A director of a Chinese Academy of Sciences research institute in North-East China told Zweig that while the people he attracts usually fall into the top 50-80% of overseas scholars, the top 20% still remain abroad. A survey conducted by David Zweig in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in 2004 shows that only a few scholars returning to China had to sacrifice high salaries or stable, tenured positions, and even fewer were returning with patents for innovative research (Zweig, 2006).
Universities’ Strategies: to achieve ‘leaping forward in development’

With the strong support from the government, some top Chinese universities have worked out their timetable to make themselves world class. For example, Peking University expects to be a world-class institution in 2015, and Tsinghua University in 2020 respectively. In order to achieve their plan in the early twenty-first century, these top Chinese universities have formulated their own developmental strategies. Given the huge gap between the world-class universities and Chinese universities, the top Chinese universities which aim to make themselves world class developed the idea of ‘leaping forward in development’ (kuayueshi fazhan) so as to catch up with the first-rate universities in the world, especially in the United Kingdom and the USA. As Min Weifang put it, ‘leaping forward in development’ means breaking out of the original paradigms and reaching new and higher levels, which consists not only of investment and hardware construction, but also includes leaps in terms of school-operating conceptions, administrative systems and talent recruitment (Min, 2004, p. 19). For universities, the most effective way to achieve ‘Leaping Forward in Development’ is to invite in talented people from all parts of the world. With the extra money from the government, the top Chinese universities have concentrated their attention on attracting the best and brightest academics from overseas, and creating corresponding systems and environments that truly enable them to bring their potentials into full play. For example, both Peking and Tsinghua Universities have launched their own programmes for attracting talented personnel from both overseas and the homeland. They offer myriad incentives to become the preferred destination of overseas scholars, including housing discounts, a high salary, jobs for spouses, international schools for children, and residence permits allowing for the retention of foreign citizenship status. Other common benefits include full-tenureship, housing, modern laboratories and equipment, and research teams comprised of (often home grown) graduate students and research staffs.

From 1998, Peking University has speeded up its pace to attract overseas scholars. Official figures show that returned scholars have accounted for nearly 40% of Peking University’s total 3000 staff members. Some of them obtained their PhD degrees from world-class universities in the USA and the United Kingdom, for instance, Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Cambridge, and Oxford. Tsinghua launched its own recruitment programme which aims to attract a hundred outstanding professors from both homeland and overseas and make them the academic leaders in different disciplines in the twenty-first century. To support this programme, the university has raised a fund of about 200 million yuan. In addition, Tsinghua University also launched a programme to invite in 100 advanced visiting scholars, a programme to send out 100 staff overseas for further studies, and other staff exchange programmes. The University also set up the Chair Professorship scheme to invite in outstanding world-class professors. Although there is a doubt about the quality of scholars recruited from overseas, Peking University asserted that it has a sound procedure and tight scrutiny system for recruiting overseas scholars, and appreciated highly the contribution made by these imported best people to the ‘leaping forward in development’ in some key disciplines.

In order to create an administrative system conductive to the building of world-class universities and retaining returned scholars, Peking University identified the university personnel system as the most fundamental area that needs reform in transforming the university into an internationally recognized world-class institution. In May 2003, the University released its first draft of the personnel reform proposal throughout the university for comments. However, the reform generated a great deal of controversy and attracted nationwide attention (Zhang, 2004). The controversy surrounding the personnel system reform at Peking University is actually a debate on how to build world-class universities in China. One of the most controversial questions is that the reform proposal requires that newly engaged professors (except for special disciplines) should be able to use a foreign language to teach and deliver course lectures. The strongest opposition came from young teachers and humanities department faculty. They argued that foreign language capability is not the essential factor of a world-class university and a first-rate university does not necessarily have to be an American-style university. Chen Pingyuan, a professor of Chinese Language and Literature at Peking University, suggested that Peking University, and Chinese universities more generally, needed a proper balance between an ‘international outlook’ and ‘homeland feelings’. He was concerned that Peking University not be transformed into an institution that is widely acclaimed in the West but has lost touch with modern China’s political,
economic, cultural, and ideological process (Chen, 2004, p. 98). Gan Yang, a graduate from Peking University who now works at the Center for Asian Studies, the University of Hong Kong as a research officer, worried that the reform strategy adopted by Peking University was more likely to turn the university into a second- or third-rate college within China rather than making it world class (Gan & Li, 2004). Sun Liping, a former sociologist at Peking University who now works at Tsinghua University, argued that personnel system reform is not the most fundamental area that needs reform. More pressing are the establishment of fair and effective academic evaluation mechanisms and getting rid of the system based on official authority and rank (guanbenwei). After one year of debates and discussions, the personnel system reform at Peking University came to an end without producing the expected results.

How Far Are Chinese Universities from the World-Class Level?

With the implementation of the 211 Project, the 985 Scheme, the 111 Programme as well as other schemes and measures initiated by the government, a huge sum of money has been invested in universities involved since the mid-1990s. Compared with the poor portion of governmental expenditure on the whole sector of education in China, the Chinese government has spared no money for building world-class universities in China. With the huge flow of money from the government, the financial situation and infrastructure of these Chinese key universities have been improved substantively. However, the question in point is whether the gap between Chinese universities and the existing world-class universities has been shortened or not. That is to say, the question is how far these universities are from the world-class level.

Let us look at the judgements made by the presidents of Chinese top universities. Xu Hongzhi, President of Peking University, is very realistic when talking about the gap between Chinese top universities and the world-class universities. He confessed frankly that although a few disciplines or specialties of Chinese universities have reached the advanced international level, currently, there is no Chinese university ranked as world-class level. He concluded that building world-class universities in China is a long-term process. When talking about the situation of Peking University, Xu admitted that though Peking University has achieved great progress in its basic research and in talent recruitment, it still lags far behind from the world top universities in terms of the contingent of world-class academics and the research results with international influences (China Education Daily, 19 March 2002).

Gu Binglin, President of Tsinghua University, confessed that there is a long way to go to make Tsinghua world class. According to Gu, there are four obstacles hindering Tsinghua’s progress to be a world-class university: the obsolete university governing structure and the incompetent managerial staff, the lack of world-class professors and scholars, the insufficient financial resources though much more money has been invested by the state, and the underdeveloped academic structures compared with the advanced international level (China Education Daily, 10 August 2004). According to a report prepared by the Research Center for World-Class University at Shanghai and released by the Committee of Science and Technology of the Ministry of Education in December 2001, both Peking and Tsinghua Universities were ranked at 200 to 300 among universities all over the world, and other key Chinese universities at 300 to 500. The gap between the Chinese top universities and existing world-class universities was still huge in terms of Nobel Prize winners, academic articles published in the top journals like Nature and Science, research funds, teachers with PhD degrees, and the number of overseas research students. In order to build world-class universities, China needs ‘leaping forward in development’ in performing great original scientific research, and cultivating world-renowned professors. The report anticipates that Peking and Tsinghua will be included in the first 100 top universities in 2025, that is, become world-class universities. According to Liu et al (2001) other top universities can become world-known universities at that time.

In 2005, the same research centre released another report. Based on two economic indicators of GDP and GDP per capita, the report predicts that the Beijing-based Peking and Tsinghua universities and the Shanghai-based Fudan and Jiao tong universities will be ranked among the top 100 universities of the world in 2020 or so, five years earlier than the prediction made by the 2001 report. The hypothesis of this prediction is that the basic condition for a country or region to host
world-class universities is that the GDP per capita should be more than $25,000. In China, the total sum of GDP and GDP per capita in Beijing and Shanghai will reach $300 billion and $25,000 in the year 2020 or so respectively (Cheng et al., 2005).

However, according to the ranking made by the UK’s *Times Higher Education Supplement* in recent years, Peking University is already among the world-class universities. The *Times Higher Education Supplement* ranking is 17 in 2004, 15 in 2005, and 14 in 2006 respectively. Nevertheless, the higher ranking of Peking University is not widely recognized in China. In terms of Nobel Prize winners, publications in *Nature* and *Science*, and Science Citation Index and Social Science Citation Index articles, the ranking of Peking University is behind the top 100 universities.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

As discussed above, since the late 1990s, the Chinese government has spared no efforts to transform a few top Chinese universities into the world-class league. Such a policy initiative reflects China’s ambition to develop a higher education system compatible with its growing economic power and its grand strategy of a peaceful rise in the globalization era. The strong commitment demonstrated by the Chinese government implies that China is eager to change the status quo of its higher education and to play a greater role in the development of a knowledge-based economy. Although the determination of the Chinese government to develop first-rate universities is firm, whether the government-dominated campaign is effective is subject to suspicion. As Kathryn Mohrman, executive director of the Hopkins-Nanjing Center and the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, argues, the consideration of world-class status within China seems largely imitative rather than creative (2005). For Mohrman, compared with world-class universities such as Oxford, Yale, and the Sorbonne, Chinese top universities lack both the long history of these Western universities but also the financial resources they enjoy. Therefore, it is unlikely that even the top universities in China can compete directly in many areas of academic life.

Of course, both the leaders of the government and universities in China have a realistic view on the gap between Chinese universities and the world-class institutions. However, they believe that China can catch up with the world-class universities through the strong intervention by the government, and especially the huge extra finance. Such a way of thinking reflects the path-dependence in the Chinese policy process. Traditionally, Chinese officials prefer to use administrative tools to achieve policy goals. For the leaders of the Chinese government, the key constraint of making Chinese universities world class is the lack of money. If enough money is available, Chinese universities can be lifted to the world-class level, because universities can make use of money to hire the best professors and researchers, to buy the most advanced facilities and equipment, to encourage academics to publish in the top journals. Therefore, their efforts to build world-class universities have been focusing on allocating more money into a few selected universities through a variety of projects, programmes, schemes, and research funds. However, the government allocated the money without strict and clear criteria and procedures. In many cases, the money was distributed arbitrarily.

Without doubt, money is an important factor hindering the development of Chinese universities. However, it is not the crucial one. On top of the lack of a long history and enough financial resources, the central constraints facing Chinese universities in their way to becoming world-class institutions is academic freedom and university governance. As Altbach (2004) argues, academic freedom and an atmosphere of intellectual excitement are central to a world-class university, where professors and students are free to pursue knowledge wherever it leads and to publish their work freely without fear of sanction by academic or external authorities. However, in China, although the state permits unfettered academic freedom in the non-political hard sciences, it still places strict restrictions on teaching and research in the fields of social sciences and humanities. For example, how to reconcile academic freedom with the guidance of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important precept of the ‘Three Represents’ is still a problem facing Chinese universities.

In addition, the governance of university is also a problem in China. As Altbach observes, world-class universities have a significant measure of internal self-governance and an entrenched
tradition, often buttressed by statutes, ensuring that the academic community (usually including professors, but sometimes also students) has control over the central elements of academic life—the admission of students, the curriculum, the criteria for the award of degrees, the selection of new members of the professoriate, and the basic direction of the academic work of the institution.

In China, although many changes have taken place in the higher education sector, especially the decentralization and diversification of financial responsibility, and the application of a fee-charging system, the control over university by the state has remained intact to a large extent. In other words, the state-university relationship has not been changed substantively. The party-state still keeps strict control over the universities politically, financially and administratively; for example, the political appointment of university presidents and Party secretaries, the administrative decision over the application of universities for state funds and research grants, and so on. Politically, leaders of universities must do their jobs under the precondition of adhering to the Party’s fundamental line. Financially, with the growth of the central government budget, universities become more dependent on the government, especially the Ministry of Education. Given the tightening administrative control from the Ministry, some Chinese academics even conclude that the abolition of the Ministry of Education is the precondition for making Chinese universities world class. Under the strict administrative control from the government, Chinese universities are administrative organizations rather than academic institutions. Within the universities, the central elements of academic life are controlled by the officials of the Party-state due to the prevailing system based on official authority and rank. No independent academic evaluation system has been established. Fundamentally speaking, China is lacking a culture to host world-class universities. As Ruth Simmons (2003), President of Brown University, comments, an excellent university system must be grounded in the culture of the society in which it is located.

Despite the above-mentioned problems, the policy of building world-class universities is highly welcomed by Chinese universities that have been vexed by the scarcity of government investment for a long time. No matter whether China can develop its world-class universities in the twenty-first century, the top universities and their staff have become the winners of such a policy. For the selected universities, the policy of building world-class universities has brought them large sums of extra money, and therefore enhanced their strength in teaching and research. Their competitive edge in undertaking major national research projects has been sharpened. For the staff, at least, their income level has been increased substantially. Nowadays, professors in the top Chinese universities are among the newly emerged middle class in China. As the relationship between the government and universities has become closer, professors have gained a lot from the huge investment and various research grants provided by the governments at all levels. As a result, a special interest link has been formed between officials who are in charge of research grants allocation and professors who are the applicants for these grants. Such a special interest link has led to rampant corruption in the Chinese higher education community. Corruption exists in the allocation of research funds, promotion, academic degree accreditation, assessment of research results, and even in talent recruitment. Such a corruptness indicates that a reshaping of state-university relationship and a restructuring of university governance are essential for China to build world-class universities.

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