

The Pursuit of Excellence and the National Rejuvenation: a Study of the Construction of World-class Universities*

Bangquan Wang
Institute of Education
Nanjing University
Nanjing, China

Huan Xu
Institute of Education
Nanjing University
Nanjing, China

Abstract—From the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the presidents of the universities and officers of the government have carried out a series of the world-class university construction. In 2015, *Overall Scheme for Comprehensively Promoting the Building of World-class Universities and Disciplines* was issued by the State Council of the People's Republic of China, which is based on the tool rationality and the high performance management. The results prove that utilitarian value orientation is to achieve the great rejuvenation of China, goal value orientation is to pursue the performance, but the goal is ambiguous, in practice, it will have many deviations; basic value orientation is to establish quality assurance mechanism, institutions, third-party evaluation agencies and governments form a concerted effort to jointly promoting the construction of the world-class universities.

Keywords—world-class universities; excellence; performance; instrumental rationality; quality assurance

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, *Overall Scheme for Comprehensively Promoting the Building of World-class Universities and Disciplines* (OSCPBWUD) was issued by the State Council of the People's Republic of China (SCPRC). The important goal of educational development was to build world-class universities and first-class disciplines. By the middle of the 21st century, the higher education power is going to be basically built. At the beginning of the New Year in 2017, China's Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, and National Development and Reform Commission jointly issued the *Implementation Measures for Comprehensively Promoting the Building of World-class Universities and Disciplines*, it clarified the selection conditions, the selection procedures, the support methods, the dynamic adjustment, the organization and implementation of the development of world-class universities and first-class disciplines. It has been necessary to comb the construction of the world-class universities since the late Qing Dynasty, and to analyze the value preference of the *OSCPBWUD* in 2015.

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II. THE HISTORY OF CONSTRUCTION OF WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA

The construction of world-class universities has gone through two stages in China, the first stage was from the late Qing Dynasty to 1949, and the second stage was from 1991 to contemporary date. The first stage was driven by the presidents in universities, and the second stage was driven by Chinese government.

A. From the Late Qing Dynasty to 1949

From the late Qing Dynasty to 1949, presidents began to explore the construction of world-class universities to contribute to the national construction and the social prosperity in some universities. Yiqi Mei, the president of Tsinghua University, repeatedly stressed: "Tsinghua had adequate funding and first-rate scholars, it is needed to make it become a world-famous university." He believed that teachers should take the research as "the first responsibility", only in this way could Tsinghua University achieve the ideal of "being the membership of world-famous universities"[1]⁷². In order to do "Chinese universities were with the equivalent level of European and American famous universities", Xiangbo Ma, founded Aurora University in 1903, developing three principles for advocating science, emphasizing literature and art, not talking about doctrinal theories. Denghui Li, the president of Fudan University, inherited Xiangbo Ma's ideas of higher education, which was high starting point of the school policy, found "Chinese universities and European and American world-class universities were neck and neck"[1]²⁸⁸. On September, 1937, Qinglai Xiong delivered a speech at the opening ceremony of Yunnan University, proposed to learn the advantages of the world-class universities in developed countries in Europe and better manage Yunnan University[1]²¹⁷.

During this period, the social unrest was the normalcy and the government changed frequently. Farsighted presidents began to explore the construction of world-class universities. Characteristics and problems included:

- With the strength of the universities, the presidents hoped Chinese Universities were on a par with European and American famous ones.
- Officers' attention was not in the higher education, there were no national strategies, policies, and financial support for the construction of first-class university.
- Under the guidance of first-class universities, outstanding achievements were made in a minority of universities, but these did not form a radiation effect.

B. *From 1991 to Contemporary Date: the Prosperity of World-class University Construction*

1) *1991-2014: the leading domestic level, world-class:*

On April, 1991, policymakers of *Ten-year Plan and the Eighth Five-Year Plan of National Economic and Social Development* pointed that a number of key universities and key disciplines should be constructed. On December, 1991, China's State Education Commission, State Planning Commission, and Ministry of Finance jointly submitted *Report on the Implementation Measures of a Number of Key Universities and Key Disciplines*. The document clearly stated that "agreed on the government setting up the 'key universities and key disciplines construction projects' which was in line with the national economic and the social development". "211 Project" was formally proposed[2]⁶³⁻⁶⁴. On February, 1993, *Outline for Chinese Educational Reform and Development* was proposed by the SCPRC. "to gather the central and local forces to run about 100 key universities and a number of key disciplines or majors" was emphasized in the document. On July, 1993, China's State Education Commission decided to formally implement the "211 Project"[2]⁶⁴. The first phase of the "211 Project" (1995-2000) focused on the construction of key disciplines, the construction of public service systems and the construction of supporting infrastructure for a number of higher schools to approach or reach the academic level of world-class universities in the early 21st century. The second phase (2001-2005) continued to focus on the construction of "211 Project" institutions so that the whole teaching, scientific research of the most universities could reach the domestic leading summit[2]⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰.

On May 4, 1998, Zemin Jiang, president of the People's Republic of China, put forward that it was needed to build a number of first-class universities with the world's advanced level at the 100th anniversary celebration of Peking University in China. Ministry of Education issued *Educational Revitalization Action Plan of Facing the 21st Century*, and has decided to concentrate on supporting the establishment of world-class universities and high-level universities in some universities since 1999. Tsinghua University and Peking University fully were funded by Ministry of Education. The remaining 30 universities got unequal co-construction of funds from different provinces and local governments [3]⁸⁷.

Compared the "211 Project" with the "985 Project", the same point was that the central government has played a catalytic role and the schools have shown the enthusiasm and initiative to strengthen the construction of world-class universities. The goal of "985 project" was to reach world-class, while the goal of "211 project" was to make a majority of schools reach the leading domestic level.

2) *Since 2015: the dream of a powerful country, formation morale:* Under the context of the innovation-driven development strategy and the realization of Chinese great rejuvenation, the SCPRC issued the *OSCPBWUD* in 2015, proposing to build first-class teams of scholars, to train top-notch and innovative talents, to develop scientific research, to innovate excellent culture, and to promote the commercialization of research findings. In addition, it was necessary to emphasize Chinese characteristics and formation morale. At the beginning of the New Year in 2017, Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance and National Development and Reform Commission jointly formulated *Implementation Measures for Comprehensively Promoting the Building of World-class Universities and Disciplines*. It clarified the selection conditions, the selection procedures, the support methods, the dynamic adjustment, the organization and implementation of the development of world-class universities and first-class disciplines. It also broke the identity solidification, and established a dynamic adjustment mechanism of universities. In the process of construction, if there wasn't conditions for the construction, and not improvement after warning, the universities and some disciplines would be discharged from the lists of world-class universities and disciplines.

"Double-First Class" was a new initiative on the basis of the "211 Project" and the "985 Project", and was conducive to making China a country of innovators with the continuity and leap.

III. THE BACKGROUND OF THE WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA

The main background of the policy included:

"Double-First Class" was a major educational project on the basis of the "211 Project" and the "985 Project", they have made many achievements, but there were still many problems, such as identity solidification, inadequate competition, etc. The central government promoted the overall development of "Double-First Class", on the basis of reflecting on the pros and cons of the previous projects, which revealed the continuity and innovation of the policy.

China's economic growth has long relied on capital and cheap labor, the main way of growth is the scale of expansion, and innovation is not strong and no enough motivation. The government in various policy documents continued to put forward to build innovative and powerful country, and to promote products to jump from the low end of the industrial chain to the high end. On May, 2016, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of china and the SCPRC issued *Outline for National Innovation-Driven*

Development Strategy, proposing to build an innovative and powerful country.

In 2010, *Outline for the National Medium and Long Term Education Reform and Development Strategy (2010-2020)* was promulgated by the government. It was important to accelerate the pace of creating world-class universities, and to build a country whose higher education was more power, higher quality.

China has been reforming and opening for more than 30 years, the economic construction has made remarkable achievements, and people's living standards have been improved. At the same time, the economic and social development also produced many problems, such as serious environmental pollution and the gap of wealth. In order to solve these problems, it is needed to vigorously develop the cause of higher education, and to create the world-class universities to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

IV. THE VALUE ORIENTATION ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S CONSTRUCTION OF WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES

In 2015, the *OSCPBWUD* was issued by the SCPRC. Chinese provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central People's Government, ministries of the SCPRC implemented. From the name of the policy text, this was an "attributive + central language" format, the attributive was "to develop a world-class university and first-class discipline", the central language was for the "overall scheme". The attributive part was a moving object structure. The verb was "co-ordination", "advancing", the object was "construction", and the modifier was "world-class university and discipline". Such a grammatical structure implied a power relationship, the central government unified planning and did the top-level design. In combination with local conditions and in accordance with the overall scheme, provinces and cities developed "Double-First Class" construction plan, and promoted the implementation. It was also a new undertaking. This typical "bureaucracy" emphasized the authority level. There were strict rules and the division of labor was relatively clear. To a certain extent, it was conducive to the rapid transmission of commands from superiors to subordinates, and to improving the efficiency of organizations, but dysfunction and other issues were easily caused to happen. The following points were found in terms of its contents.

A. *Utilitarian Value Orientation: Realizing the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation*

In the process of Chinese "Double-First Class" construction, utilitarian value orientation was referred to utilitarian motives, rational judgments, effectiveness, and more benefits. Burton Clark said: "As with other value systems, the loyalty system had its own paradox. A country at least required higher education with three types of utility: Social and economic utility, vocational training and practical value to society; cultural utility, cultural renaissance and national characteristics; political utility, good citizens were cultivated and political goals were served. The first utility

meant focusing on technologies, natural sciences and specific vocational training; the second utility depended on the humanities and social science researchers' abilities ... the political utility required that the principle of obedience, the principle of coherence and the principle of discipline were given first priority." [4]²⁸¹

"Double-First Class" construction was launched in this context of the "211 Project" and "985 Project" making important breakthrough, global competition becoming increasingly fierce, constructing innovative country, and realizing China dream. Universities were used as tools, pursuing the first-class. The ultimate goal was to build up a strong country of Higher Education, and to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. From the perspective of social and economic efficiency, as the top of the educational system, higher education has been high-profile. At present, China's scales of higher education were large, but not strong. It aimed at improving the level of higher education development, realizing the goal of a powerful country in higher education, improving the core competitiveness of higher education that world-class universities and disciplines were built, the discipline layout was adjusted, and major national need-oriented strategy and collaborative innovation were raised. Firstly, the world's reputation was earned for Chinese higher education, a national brand and national image were established; secondly, it is conducive to enhancing the country's competitiveness in the global market, to attaining power of discourse, and to achieving social and economic development. From the perspective of cultural efficiency, it creatively inherited traditional culture of the Chinese nation. It was necessary to establish a system of academic evaluation of philosophy and social sciences and to build world-class universities with Chinese characteristics and Chinese styles. These demands have been repeated in the policy, which reflected the appeal of national cultural rejuvenation and national characteristics. From the perspective of political utility, it is necessary to strengthen and improve the party's leadership, to grasp the ideological leadership, and to cultivate the builders and successors of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics in universities. All revealed the principles of universities serving the political goals.

In the eyes of traditional idealists, universities were "ivory tower". National, ethnic and social needs were ignored. But it was not conducive to the development of universities, and national political and economic development provided an important force for the rapid development of Universities. Universities were served as a gas station to meet the needs of the country and society, not refusing or deliberately keeping the distance. Burton Clark mentioned in the book titled *Higher Education System*, "In higher education, there was always a set of values that were closely related to the interests of states and a set of concepts related to the survival of regimes and nations. It was perhaps the most appropriate to use the word 'loyalty' as the name of this group of values. This value system had a wide meaning, including restrictions on criticism and how the higher education system served nations' needs. Ignoring this value

system was tantamount to avoiding central issues of higher education. Any country was no exception." [4]²⁸¹

Universities should be loyal to politics, economic and culture, comprehensively and proactively adapt to their development. This was referred to the positive side of the adaptation. As to negative, backward, biased, wrong things, stakeholders should reject them in universities [5]¹⁷².

B. Goal Value Orientation: Pursuit of Excellence

In the organization system, organizations had a certain goal. In order to achieve the goal, organizations would integrate all kinds of resources, and this operation process was performance management. In other words, performance management was a series of institutional arrangements and behavioral implementation processes that were organized around the goal of improving performance. It not only set and implemented the goal, but also evaluated results of the implementation. According to Nicholas Henry, efficiency meant maximizing the ratio of inputs to output with the least available resources, while effectiveness was to achieve the expected results [6]²⁸⁴. Therefore, government's performance management had both efficiency and effectiveness. Performance excellence was a comprehensive organizational performance management approach that enabled organizations and individuals to progress and develop, improved the overall performance and capabilities of organizations, created values for customers and other stakeholders, and sustained organizations' success [7]⁵⁴. Although the theory of performance excellence was often applied to enterprises, the principles governing organizational performance were applicable to the educational system as well. From a historical point of view, the talent pool, excellent teaching and research level had earned a wide reputation for universities in Germany and the United States. In order to raise international influence power, Chinese universities should aim at the pursuit of first-class or excellence. After the long and persistent efforts, world-class universities and first-class disciplines will enter into the front ranks of the world in terms of quantity and strength. As to the goal setting, it was necessary to take root in China and to take Chinese characteristics, to create world-class universities and disciplines. When it comes to "first class", it was needed to cultivate top-notch talents and to produce first-rate achievements. It took about 34 years to build world-class universities and first-class disciplines. Its strategic goals were lofty, which reflected China's destiny was closely linked to higher education. In addition, advocating fair competition between different universities was the government's pursuit of performance. Performance was repeatedly occurred in the *OSCPBWUD* in terms of assessment of the results. According to the evaluation results, dynamic support for universities, more outputs were adopted by the government. Such a management model was conducive to improvement of universities' quality.

Attempting to form normative statements about universities' goals often produces non practical or ambiguous ones. They cannot be tested by one or more of the following. Firstly, is the goal clear? Can you define some specific procedures to measure the extent to which the goal is

achieved? Secondly, is there a problem with the target itself? Do organizations have the potential to achieve the goal? Is there a possibility of failure? Is the goal approved? Are some of the most important groups in universities agreeing on this goal? [8]²⁵⁸. Performance management is goal-oriented and is conducive to evaluation and management. The goal from the *OSCPBWUD* was first-rate or excellent, so the vocabulary itself was ambiguous. The ambiguity of the goal is due to the fact that the one is the core attribution of a top university. This tension is derived from trying to impose a target-oriented action model on an organization that acts in another way [8]²⁵⁹. Everyone is pursuing first-class, but it is difficult to define some specific procedures to measure the degree of achievements. In order to facilitate the operation, scientific publication of staffs was regarded as an important index, which has triggered complaints and boycotts from staffs. There was no agreement on first-class goals. Against voices of the most important groups were often heard. The pursuit of excellence was a possibility of failure, the organization's risk assessment was seriously inadequate. A number of well-known universities such as Peking University and Tsinghua University have listed a timetable about building world-class university a long time ago, what evidence did this time point come from? Was it random decision or argument? Have they adequately estimated the risk of failure? They hastily called for a neither scientific nor rigorous timetable for first-class goals.

C. Basic Value Orientation: the Establishment of Quality Assurance Mechanism

"Double-First Class" construction is a systematic project, and it needs perfect quality guarantee mechanism. After the analysis of the policy text, the quality guarantee mechanism of "Double-First Class" construction has the following patterns. They form a joint force to ensure the educational quality and promote the realization of China dream as soon as possible.

1) *Quality assurance model was dominated by the government*: National Education System Reform Leading Group is responsible for the top-level design and funding investment. Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, National Development and Reform Commission are responsible for planning and deployment, promoting the implementation, supervision and management. Under the guidance of the government, special funds were set up to support universities affiliated to different ministries, while local governments give funds, policies, resources to ones. The construction funds of provincial universities are in the charge of local governments, and the central government gives guidance through the support of the relevant funds for the development of provincial universities.

2) *The quality assurance model was led by the third party evaluation institution*: One of the highlights of the *OSCPBWUD* is the positive use of the third party evaluation to improve the scientific and public credibility. The transfer of part of the public power to the third party evaluation institution is the embodiment of the new public management

theory in the policy text. An important point of the theory is that the government no longer steers and paddles at the same time, gives the task of rowing to a more efficient market, and focuses on steering. Under the guidance of the third party evaluation institution, the evaluation results will be directly linked to the allocation of resources. That is to say, the evaluation institutions' right to speak is increasing, and whether their evaluation results are objective and fair will be particularly important. Moreover, in the market environment, there should be a series of institutional rules for the qualification and withdrawal mechanism of the third party evaluation institutions, otherwise it will be detrimental to the smooth progress of quality assurance work.

3) *Quality assurance model was dominated by universities*: It is needed to strengthen the academic committee and other academic organizations under the guidance of regulations that play an important role in the discipline construction, academic evaluation, academic development and academic atmosphere construction. It is explored that the mechanism of participation of teachers and students in school decision-making. The internal governance structure should be improved in universities under the guidance of "Double-First Class" construction. Practice has rules to follow, administration of scholarly work by the professors, the academic power, and the democratic style will be respected. Staffs, students and social stakeholders participate in school decision-making, so as to improve the scientific and rational decision-making. At the same time, leaders of universities strive for their support, appease public opinion disputes, and promote school reform smoothly. In an organization characterized by high inertia and low characteristics, it is unwise to believe that the belief in the viability of the action plan exceeds the possibility of reality. From this point of view, public accountability, participant supervision, and other techniques to expand the scope of legal participation in decision-making processes are important means of limiting participants' expectations to a reasonable extent. In general, direct participation in a decision making process is a more effective way of suppressing unrealistic expectations than the presidents' speech [8]²⁶⁷.

In addition, the overall scheme attaches great importance to the participation of social forces, such as university-enterprise cooperation, enterprises provide funding for the development of universities. Universities should also actively seek support from society, such as the development of donations, the formation of multi input and joint support from the governments, societies and universities. The supervisory role of society has an extremely positive effect on making universities' self-discipline, curbing the corruption, and more policies being exposed to the sun in the meantime, which is conducive to the development of universities in a benign direction.

V. CONCLUSION

China's world-class university construction has gone through two stages. Utilitarian value orientation, goal value orientation, and basic value orientation constitute the three dimensions of value orientation.

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