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Institutional Diversity in Chinese Higher Education

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The degree to which Chinese higher education has maintained some institutional diversity is quite remarkable, in spite of pressures to conform to the model of a global research university. University presidents are naturally concerned about their institutions' locations in global-ranking systems, and national policy has supported significant efforts to enable universities to achieve world-class quality and standing. Strong national programs have also been under way to support fields of knowledge seen as important in China's development and to ensure some redistribution of resources to less-developed parts of the country.

GLOBALIZATION AS A PROCESS OF HOMOGENIZATION

Chinese higher education has been reshaped in the massification process toward a highly hierarchical system, with substantive priority funding given to the top 100 institutions in Project 211, initiated in 1993. An even-steeper hierarchy has

emerged with Project 985, established to support 39 top institutions in 1998. These institutions benefit from resources and opportunities for global engagement, setting them apart from the majority of regional and local institutions. A kind of homogenization toward world trends in the mergers have taken place, as well as the strong impetus toward curricular comprehensiveness. While China's medical universities were separate institutions under the Soviet model of the 1950s, virtually all of them have been merged with top-level comprehensive and polytechnic universities. Faculty have argued that this was important in raising their rankings, since medical research attracts considerable research funding. In addition, comprehensive universities, such as Peking and Fudan Universities, which formerly focused only on basic arts and sciences, have now developed faculties of engineering and management. Polytechnic universities, such as Tsinghua and Shanghai Jiao Tong, have developed programs in humanities and social sciences.

In spite of this trend, some of the unique types of universities developed under Soviet socialist influences in the 1950s have survived and enhanced their profiles over the recent period. This has ensured the maintenance of considerable diversity in the system. These include normal universities, agricultural universities, and universities engaged with minority cultures. Their persistence has been made possible by national policy and by the initiative of institutional leaders in a period of enhanced autonomy. Three examples may give some insight into how this has happened.

EDUCATION-RELATED UNIVERSITIES IN A DIVERSE SYSTEM

The “normal university” is an almost unknown concept in Anglo-American academic discourse. Derived from France’s Ecole Normale Supérieure, it is a comprehensive university focusing on basic arts and sciences and the preparation of teachers for secondary and tertiary schools. China already had normal universities before 1949, and under Soviet influence they were developed into a nationwide system. Leaders of East China Normal University in Shanghai, one of China’s top educational institutions, explained their resentment of a government policy that forbade them from removing the word “normal” from their title or from any kind of merger, except those bringing in cognate educational institutions for early childhood, special education, or adult education. While seeing this as a serious disadvantage at first, later they managed to attract substantive funding from the Shanghai government for strengthening their image as an enhanced version of the normal university. The East China Normal University took on new responsibilities for education at all levels of schooling and for adult learners, as well as broadening the curriculum into new areas of the social and natural sciences.

A strategic partnership with the Ecole Normale Supérieure in graduate education and the decision to make this Shanghai campus an international education city has now given this institution a unique identity and profile. The efforts of successive presidents and the support of the Shanghai municipal government enabled them to enter Projects 211 and 985. These activists have led the way in demonstrating the contribution normal universities can make to a knowledge economy. Shanghai’s stunning debut as number one in the world, in the most recent Program for International Student Assessment tests (of the

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), has now given them visibility on a global stage.

AN AGRICULTURAL MULTIVERSITY

Northwest Agricultural and Forestry University (NWAUFU) in the small town of Yangling, some distance from Xi'An, made a similar strategic decision. This institution has promoted its image as a high-level center of food research rather than the comprehensive multiversity it has become, through the merger of two universities and five research institutes. The government discouraged the merging of agricultural universities with other types of universities, yet there was not as strong a fiat against merging or changing the title, as in the case of normal institutions. Nevertheless, NWAUFU's leaders saw the value of emphasizing their location in the heartland of traditional Chinese agriculture and creating a major center for the development of international food policy and research. They used the resources, given to them at the time of their merger, and the greatly enhanced regional infrastructure developed under China's Great West Project. When we first visited NWAUFU in 1993, it took two or three hours on a rutted rural road from Xi'An. Now, a four-lane highway gets visitors there from the Xi'An airport in 40 minutes. NWAUFU's leaders told us that they had purposefully chosen international partners—such as Wageningen in Holland and Cornell in the United States—to strengthen their capacity in such important areas as global food security and agricultural environmentalism, rather than pursuing the global research university model.

A MULTICULTURAL UNIVERSITY FOR MINORITIES

Yanbian University in Northeast China, on the border of North Korea, provides another interesting example of persisting diversity. Founded in the early 1950s to train Korean minority students for teaching and local governmental leadership, it has recently raised its status to a national university, supported by funding from Project 211. Here, institutional leadership seems to have been crucial to the preservation and enhancement of this institution's unique identity as a multicultural university. The six country talks, involving China, Russia, Japan, the United States, and the two Koreas, have drawn considerable global attention to the region; and Yanbian University has made international relations and global geopolitics a main area of curricular focus. It has also attracted students nationwide because of its bilingual Korean-Chinese pedagogy and the exchange and employment opportunities resulting from the dynamism of the South Korean economy. While originally a local university, it now attracts more than half of its student body from all parts of China. This includes majority Han students and other minority students who are as keen as Koreans to learn the language and connect to the region. Even though Yanbian is not located in China's northwest, its leaders were successful in applying for infrastructural support from the Great Northwest Project, since it qualified as being in a disadvantaged region.

PERSISTING DIVERSITY IN FACE OF GLOBALIZATION

A first look at recent developments in Chinese higher education would suggest conformity to the homogenizing forces of globalization. A closer look reveals a balancing of efforts to support world-class universities on a global stage, with

national policies in support of diversity and national programs of economic redistribution. Thus, even the elite group of top universities includes diverse types of institutions, which draw attention to local dimensions of China's educational traditions, agricultural-development trajectory, and policies for the support of minority cultures. In this, China may have an important lesson for other developing countries, as they seek to balance efforts to reach global standards with support for the integrity and authenticity of local or national values and patterns.