



Comparative Analysis of Russian and Chinese Universities Development Programs

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Abstract: Both Russian and Chinese governments declare current status of state-to-state relations as all-inclusive partnership and strategic cooperation. The development of ties between Russia and China, including the field of higher education, has reached its climax. The main reason for this was the painful break in relations between Russian universities and universities in Western countries after 2022 that can be compared with a new iron curtain for Russia.

The object of the research is the development of universities in Russia and China. The subject of the research is a complex of factors that influenced the more successful development of Chinese universities compared to Russian ones. The purpose of the study is to consider a variety of factors that influenced more successful development of Chinese universities compared to Russian ones, including measures of state support conveyed through the university development programs in Russia and China.

The research question is why Chinese universities managed to take leading positions in world university rankings, while Russian universities failed to do so. When analyzing government support programs for Chinese and Russian universities, information from the official websites of these development programs was used. The methods used were comparative analysis, analysis and synthesis of empirical data. The scientific novelty of the research lies in the establishment of a high degree of similarity in government support for university development programs in Russia and China, and the analysis of the factors contributing to the more successful development of the Chinese higher education system.

Based on the research, it was concluded that the mechanisms for reforming higher education systems in Russia and China have much in common. Development programs in Russian and Chinese universities are also similar. Chinese universities have achieved greater success in their development due to the more successful development of China in general. Today China is the second largest economy in the world. China has the world's largest education system in the world, and has more opportunities to develop international cooperation. The success of Chinese university development programs was also influenced by a more innovative nature of the Chinese economy compared to Russia. The need to develop higher education in China was determined by the development of the Chinese economy, and was not just an isolated project determined by the ambitions of the country's leadership.

Keywords: University, higher education, development, China, Russia, development programs, university ranking, PRC, research, commercialization, state support.

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Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia for several decades sought to be integrated into the Western educational environment, after 2022 the concept of a “Pivot to the East” has gained importance for Russia. Among other Russian partners China is a standout in terms of its economic and political significance. In the current situation, China is the most economically and technologically developed allied state of Russia. China is the second economy in the world by nominal GDP. Recently, the development of ties with China, including those in the field of higher education, has become especially important for Russia.

Studying China's rapid development in all spheres, including education, is of significant interest to the developing countries that are trying to make a similar breakthrough. The study of state support measures for university development programs in Russia and China is currently especially relevant for Russia after the announcement of withdrawal from the Bologna process and the suspension of cooperation between Russian universities and universities of the USA and Europe.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that it was possible to establish a high degree of similarity in state support for university development programs in Russia and China, and to comprehensively consider the factors contributing to the more successful development of the Chinese higher education system compared to the Russian one.

The object of the study is the development of universities in Russia and China. The subject of the study is a complex of factors that influenced the development of Chinese and Russian universities. The purpose of the study is to consider a variety of factors that influenced the more successful development of Chinese universities compared to Russian ones, including measures of state support conveyed through the university development programs in Russia and China. The research question is why Chinese universities managed to take leading positions in world university rankings, while Russian universities failed to do so. Information from the official websites of these development programs was used. The methods used were comparative analysis, analysis and synthesis of empirical data.

University Development Programs in Russia

The Russian government began to pay special attention to the development of higher education about 20 years ago. During this period, it became obvious that Russian universities could not compete with Western ones on a number of criteria, including the research sphere. Traditionally, in the USSR, the centers of research activity were the research institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences, while universities focused primarily on education. Moreover, educational sphere has never been commercialized in the Soviet Union, the funds were provided by the state budget. The Russians were not accustomed to pay for the education. In addition, after the collapse of the USSR and the abolition of the planned economy, the connections between universities and the real sector of the economy happened to be torn apart. During a certain period, universities were largely underfunded. In the 2000s, with economic growth and the availability of funds to finance development programs, the Russian government faced the non-trivial task of reforming the higher education system in accordance with the changing situation in the country and the desire for

integration into the international higher education system. In 2006, a project aimed at creation of federal universities appeared in Russia. The stated goal of creating federal universities was to develop a system of higher professional education based on optimizing regional educational structures and strengthening ties between educational institutions of higher education and the economy and social sphere of the federal districts (Klyaritskaya et al. 2017, 55). Under this project, 10 large federal universities were created as a result of merging several universities by 2014. Federal universities receive funding at several levels - federal, regional and municipal.

From 2008 to 2011 a federal project to create research universities was implemented in Russia. The purpose of the competition for participation in this project was to select universities that could not only organize an effective learning process, but also merge it with scientific research conducted at the same university. 29 universities received the status of research universities in Russia. In 2012, a five-year project “5-100” was launched, which was subsequently extended until 2020. The main goal of the project was to increase the prestige of Russian higher education and get at least five universities into the top 100 according to three international rankings: Quacquarelli Symonds, Times Higher Education and Academic Ranking of World Universities. Today, unfortunately, it can be stated that this initiative has not lived up to the expectations placed on it. In the QS World University Rankings for 2024, Moscow State University took 87th place, St. Petersburg State University - 315th, Bauman MSTU – 319th, RUDN University – 342nd, Kazan Federal University – 396th. This is not even the result of a break in relations with Western universities that has occurred in recent years, as universities involved in the program did not show significant growth in rankings throughout the entire period of the program’s implementation (University Rankings n.d).

From 2016 to 2017 a project of flagship universities was implemented in Russia. A flagship university is a university created after merging several existing higher education institutions. A flagship university is aimed at focusing on supporting the region by providing the local labor market with highly qualified specialists, as well as solving pressing problems of the regional economy. In total, 34 flagship universities were created in Russia. Both projects, the creation of federal universities and the creation of flagship universities, were aimed at integrating the scientific and educational activities of universities into the economies of regions and districts. In 2021, the university development project “Priority 2030” was launched (Sociocenter 2024). The project included a significantly larger number of universities than its predecessor projects. The stated goal of the program is to form more than 100 progressive modern universities in Russia by 2030 – centers of scientific, technological and socio-economic development. The project is quite flexible; universities elaborate their own development programs, which are reviewed by expert commissions. Based on the results of the review of the universities taking part in the project, federal experts make their recommendations; every year the development programs are supplemented and can be adjusted (Sociocenter 2024). All of the above projects require additional funding for universities participating in the programs. It can be summarized that the Russian government has been initiating comprehensive university development programs for about 20 years, mainly using the experience of the developing universities in other countries,

focusing on the criteria that form the basis for evaluating universities, adopted in most countries of the world.

In 2011 and 2012, two Russian universities entered the top 400 rankings. In 2018, Moscow State University improved its position compared to 2011 and took 95th place in the ranking. The significant progress of Moscow State University is associated with the growth of its academic indicators and reputation among employers; the data on the indicator “the share of foreigners in the total number of students” has also improved (Abakumova 2020).

Tomsk State University showed the most significant growth by 104 points in 2016, becoming 377th in the QS ranking. The Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology showed the second most important result: it rose in the ranking by 80 points and took 350th place in the ranking. Russian universities that were included in the QS rankings in 2011 had low indicators for “the share of foreigners in scientific research and teaching staff” and “the number of citations per staff member”. Since 2017, the pace of internationalization has improved, and the share of foreign students and foreign teachers has been increasing (Abakumova 2020).

The success of these initiatives can be considered relative: on the one hand, some positive changes are evident in most universities; several universities have significantly improved their positions in world university rankings; on the other hand, Russian universities still occupy very modest positions in these rankings.

University Development Programs in China

The experience of implementing university development programs in China is obviously of interest, since over the past decades, Chinese universities have significantly improved their positions in international university rankings. In the QS World University Rankings 2024, 5 Chinese universities are included in the top 100 universities, 29 Chinese universities are included in the list of the 500 best universities in the world (University Rankings n.d). China began to pay attention to the development of universities in accordance with world standards approximately 10-15 years earlier than Russia. The main provisions for reforming higher education in China were developed in 1993 and were as follows:

education has been recognized as a strategic priority of the country; government funding remains predominant, but must be supplemented by funds from other sources; a special fund to provide financial support to 30 leading universities was created (Chebanenko 2013, 259).

It is important to note, that education in the PRC was no longer viewed as a secondary sphere; it was recognized as a productive force. Chinese economists calculated the return on investment in education. The results obtained show that the return on investment in education significantly exceeds the return on investment in fixed assets. Therefore, education was no longer financed on a residual basis (Chebanenko 2013, 259). The growth in the efficiency of Chinese universities was largely influenced by comprehensive programs of government support for universities in China – ‘Project 211’ and ‘Project 985’.

Launched in 1995, ‘Project 211’ was Chinese government’s first major reform-era program to promote Chinese higher education and internationalize it. The goal of this project is to raise its member universities to international academic standards by the end of the 21st century. The project got its name from the abbreviation

of the 21st century and 100 universities. About 100 Chinese universities were initially selected for priority funding under this program. These universities were to become leading universities of “international standard” by the turn of the century. The selected universities were mainly concentrated in Beijing, Shanghai, and the East Coast of China. The selected universities were to achieve high international standards in both teaching and research, and thus serve as models for other universities in China. This project was followed by ‘Project 985’, which was officially launched in May 1998 on the centennial anniversary of Peking University. This program is aimed to create elite universities from the 39 universities of ‘Project 211’ (Ahlers, Christmann-Budian 2023).

In 2009, the Chinese government formally announced the so-called ‘C9 League’, the first most prestigious universities of the ‘Project 985’, the goal of which was to create an elite group of Chinese universities, share their resources, and attracting the most talented students from all over the world (Guruleva 2020). These universities, which occupied leading positions in national and international rankings, received continuous government support (more than half of all funding allocated under the ‘Project 985’) (Guo 2020). Increasingly attracting attention outside China, they were supposed to form a network as China’s ‘Ivy League’ and recruit the world’s most talented students. The ‘C9 League’ members managed to quickly increase their research output, especially in terms of publications, further improving their positions in international university rankings. The government’s intensive investment in building high-performing elite educational institutions has clearly paid off.

Investments in facilities and scientific developments in universities included in these projects amounted to 54% and 72% of total capital investments in all Chinese universities. In addition, universities participating in the projects were able to win the vast majority of scientific grants and carry out more than 2/3 of all major scientific research in the country (Chebanenko 2013, 261). The allocated funds were also used to improve the qualifications of teachers, many of whom were able to undergo advanced training abroad. Project 211 included 3 main tasks:

1. Improve the general condition of its member universities;
2. Develop key areas of scientific knowledge;
3. Build a system of innovative information infrastructure (Abakumova 2020).

As part of the implementation of ‘Project 211’, the Chinese computer network for educational and scientific research (CERNET-China Education and Research Network) and the academic information library system for Chinese higher education (CALIS China Academic Library & Information System) were built (Yuan 2016, 173). In addition, a system for the collective use of equipment and university resources (China Education Resource System. CERS) was developed. By 2011, ‘Project 211’ had created 1,073 key scientific branches at universities. The implementation of Project 985 led to a significant increase in the number of graduate students in China: from 9,000 in 1999 to 40,000 in 2007. Of these, more than 50% studied at universities included in the ‘Project 985’. The result of the implementation of these projects was also that from 1998 to 2006, the total area of universities in China increased by 2.6 times, the area of classrooms and

classrooms increased by 3.8 times, and the total cost of scientific equipment increased by 4.8 times (Yuan 2016, 177).

Universities included in the 985 Project show a high degree of internationalization, including high academic mobility among students and teachers, internationalization of curricula and programs, and an increase in the number of joint scientific research (Ramírez-Castañeda 2020, 649). As for the universities that were included in the 'Project 211', but could not get into the 'Project 985', the degree of internationalization of the educational process in them turned out to be less, the emphasis was placed on the academic mobility of teachers and the internationalization of curricula (Ramírez-Castañeda 2020, 649).

Another direction of the policy of reforming the higher education system in China has been the active merger of higher educational institutions, including large universities with each other. In total, 708 universities were merged into 302 universal universities (Li 2023). The reforms of the higher education system in China have demonstrated effectiveness. In 2015, Xinhua University took 25th place (Abakumova 2020). Today, Peking University ranks 17th in the QS World University Rankings, Tsinghua University is 25th, and Zhejiang University is 44th. The 50th and 51st positions are occupied by Fudan University and Shanghai Jiaotong University (University Rankings n.d).

Separately, it is worth mentioning Hong Kong universities, which are taken into account separately from universities in mainland China in the ranking. 26th - position in the QS World University Rankings is occupied by the University of Hong Kong, 47th - Chinese University of Hong Kong, 60th - Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, 65th - Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 70th - City University of Hong Kong (University Rankings n.d). They were not included into the development programs implemented by the Chinese government but already had what mainland Chinese university were looking for – high level of internationalization, academic culture, developed economy of the region and hi-tech industrial neighborhood in Guangzhou and Shenyang.

After the end of Project 985 in 2013 and a transition period, in 2018 China launched another program, the Overall Plan for Coordinately Advancing the Construction of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines (Double First-Class Initiative), which runs until 2050. The Double First-Class project differs from Project 985 and Project 211, but has the same goal of raising the international profile of Chinese education. The list of universities was released through a series of competitive selections, peer review, and government assessment in the form of a periodic selection process that was supported and approved by the State Council, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Finance. The initiative combined two tracks: elite universities (most of the institutions that were former participants in Project 985) with an institutional focus on advancing leading disciplines or research areas. This combined approach was similar to Germany's Excellence Initiative, which began in 2005 and was closely followed by China (Liu, Turner, Jing 2019). Although the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission of China did not provide detailed information on the criteria and selection process for the Double First-Class project, it was reported that both the

performance of national experts and the rankings of the most famous foreign universities were considered (Zhao 2018).

Overall, Chinese universities have steadily risen in international university rankings since 2000, with so-called elite Chinese universities occupying leading positions in world rankings. Although other factors may have played a decisive role in the government's choice of which universities to prioritize, references to global measurement standards and rankings were used to lend an "aura of legitimacy" and objectivity to the selection (Perry 2020). Thus, the highly centralized resource allocation mechanism quickly led to a "Matthew effect" with Chinese characteristics: if strong universities improve their rankings, they will also receive more resources and will obviously continue to improve their performance and achieve success in assessment and ranking. The Chinese government not only used international measurements and rankings for domestic decision-making and resource allocation, but also set targets for its universities to participate in world rankings. While the first two decades of reform focused on building ideal national infrastructures for scientific research and higher education, the logic of cascading government planning and support, competition promotion, performance assessment and ranking was fully adopted as a strategy to become a global scientific power with world-class universities (Ahlers Christmann-Budian 2023).

The government has increasingly encouraged Chinese universities to compete for top rankings and to meet state-set goals on a global scale. Through the ongoing Double First-Class Initiative, provincial governments are now setting specific targets for a certain number of universities to achieve Double First-Class status and a certain number of university disciplines to achieve World First-Class status by 2050. On the one hand, Chinese universities strive to comply with global principles of higher education governance and research cooperation; on the other hand, comprehensive policy scientometrics and multi-level performance assessment and government support closely link universities to state STI policy structures. In addition to material factors, a prerequisite for the rapid introduction of world rankings in China may also be the striking prevalence of statistics, evaluation and competition in Chinese government and politics, if not in society as a whole (Liu 2009).

Since the beginning of the reform era in the 1980s, China has adopted quantitative criteria for measuring scientific performance used internationally and integrated them into a highly centralized domestic policy structure in which universities play a significant role. As a result, Chinese universities have come to be evaluated twice: globally and domestically. With a long history of quantitative performance assessment and intense competition for government support, China has developed a strong incentive structure for Chinese universities to participate in the global ranking game. The rise and consolidation of Chinese institutions in the most prominent rankings in recent years is the result of intensive and targeted efforts by Chinese science policy strategists and university leaders to promote precisely the methods and metrics needed to succeed in these rankings.

Methods

The systematic literature review was conducted within the Russian Index of National Citation database. The search was conducted searching for the following phrases: 'Russian universities

development programs’ and ‘Chinese universities development programs. The search for these phrases was conducted within titles, abstracts and keywords in September 2024 without any limitation in the search time-span covering publication up until that month. Further exclusions were performed by qualitative analysis of research abstracts in order to select articles that research similarities and differences of Russian and Chinese universities development programs by using website analysis as the primary method. The research was then limited to publications in the research area of education. The study utilized Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) in comparing the educational systems of Russia and China, which was introduced by Charles Ragin in the 1970s and gained prominence in monitoring and evaluation. The purpose of the study was to compare Russian and Chinese universities development programs and analyze the factors that influenced the more successful development of Chinese universities compared to Russian ones, including measures of state

support conveyed through the university development programs in Russia and China. The research question is why Chinese universities managed to take leading positions in world university rankings, while Russian universities failed to do so.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that it was possible to establish a high degree of similarity in state support for university development programs in Russia and China, and to comprehensively consider the factors contributing to the more successful development of the Chinese higher education system.

Results

In general, the reforms carried out by the Russian government are quite similar to the reforms carried out in China. The table below clearly demonstrates similar initiatives for the development of higher education systems in China and Russia.

Table 1. Comparison of Russian and Chinese educational initiatives

| | Initiatives in China | Program Launch Year | Corresponding initiatives in Russia | Program Launch Year |
|---|------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | State Key Laboratories | 1984 | Research Institute | 2008 |
| 2 | Project 211 | 1995 | Federal university | 2006 |
| | | | Core university project | 2016 |
| | | | Priority-2030 Program | 2021 |
| 3 | Project 985 | 2009 | Project «5/100» | 2012 |
| 4 | Double First Class | 2018 | n/a | - |

In both Chinese and Russian programs, the mechanisms for developing universities and increasing university rankings are quite similar, they include, among other things:

- Consolidation of several universities into large universities.
- Priority funding for large leading universities.
- Separate funding for top universities with the aim of their inclusion in world university rankings.
- Comprehensive development of research activities of universities.
- Attracting leading scientists, including foreign ones.
- Commercialization of research and educational activities of universities.
- Connection of research activities of universities with regional economies.
- Material incentives for publications in highly rated journals by faculty.
- Integration into the international system of higher education.

It would be unfair to say that China has achieved great success only through large financial injections. The analysis of projects carried out by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation shows that all initiatives are in line with global trends in the development of universities, the designated goals and priorities are consistent with the development guidelines of the world's leading universities. It would also be inappropriate to assert

that the Russian government set some incorrect guidelines, used the wrong mechanisms, or allocated insufficient funding. We also see that projects replaced each other, adapting to changing realities. In this case, the obvious conclusion is that the problem lies not only in the content of the higher education reforms being carried out in Russia or insufficient quality of management, but in factors on which these reforms have no influence. The higher education systems in Russia and China do not exist in a vacuum, but in their own countries with their own realities.

Discussion

Speaking about the success of Chinese universities in world university rankings, it is worth noting that along with 5 Chinese universities included in the top 100, there are also 5 Hong Kong universities, which are taken into account separately from universities located in mainland China. These Hong Kong universities practically did not participate in any development programs initiated by the Chinese government, and there are as many of them in the top 100 as universities in the mainland China. It seems obvious that Hong Kong universities could occupy such high positions in the rankings due to the high degree of integration into the international academic community of developed countries, which is not least due to the widespread use of English in Hong Kong. Both Russia and mainland China have a low prevalence of English, including in the academic environment, which means a significant obstacle to integration into the global educational and scientific environment. According to some estimates, about 98% of

scientific research is published in English (Ramírez-Castañeda 2020).

Isolation from the world scientific community is a serious obstacle to the development of science in Russia, and we are not talking about a sharp deterioration in relations with Western countries in recent years; a similar situation could be observed over 20 years ago. In both Russia and China, the teaching staff generally has a fairly low level of English proficiency and, accordingly, has the opportunity to follow the latest research in their field of knowledge, communicate with their colleagues from other countries, and publish in leading world journals. However, if China still strives for internationalization, then in Russia this trend is not so obvious.

By 2002, the number of Chinese working in joint ventures or wholly owned by foreigners reached 2.7 million (Frezghi, Tsegay 2019, 644). The need for professionals has led to the need to train the necessary specialists abroad, as well as to develop their universities and establish their connections with the best Western universities.

By 2015, China managed to reach third place in the world in terms of the number of foreign students studying in the country, their number by this time had reached almost 400,000, mainly due to the development of international relations by Chinese universities with foreign partners (Frezghi, Tsegay, 2019, 645). The number of Chinese students studying abroad by 2015 exceeded half a million, most of them in economically developed countries – the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Japan and South Korea (Frezghi, Tsegay 2019, 650-651). Universities in China actively participate in exchange programs. Internationalization has become the key to the development of higher education in China (Frezghi, Tsegay 2019, 645).

It seems obvious that academic standards and academic ethics characteristic of Western academic institutions also played a significant role in the success of Hong Kong universities. Unfortunately, we can note the desire of many Russian universities to achieve only formal targets, and not deep transformations. Speaking about the success of Hong Kong universities, it is worth noting that Hong Kong universities have a competitive advantage in the transfer of science and technology to the innovation system of Southern China. This allows them to build innovation capacity in Shenzhen and Guangdong. Recently, Hong Kong universities have established a number of research institutes in Shenzhen (Boudrina 2019, 66). The Chinese economy as a whole has been characterized by a rapid pace of development in recent years, including due to high-tech industries. Chinese universities have more opportunities to commercialize their scientific and technical development compared to Russian ones. The commercialization rate of patents obtained by universities in China is only 5% . In Russia, this figure does not exceed 2% (Kulyagina 2020, 618). The income from innovation activities of Russian universities is extremely low (Kulyagina 2020, 629). At the same time, it is worth mentioning that the low degree of commercialization of patents obtained by universities is a characteristic feature of all developing economies, including China, Brazil and Russia (Gu 2023).

In addition, it is obvious that the Chinese economy is much larger than the Russian one, so the Chinese government can afford to spend significantly more on education. Another important factor is that China began implementing university development initiatives

earlier, in some cases more than 20 years earlier. China's population is almost 10 times larger than Russia's; China has higher growth potential, the potential to increase universities and the number of students. If in Russia there are currently about 750 universities and about 4 million students, then in China there are about 3,000 universities and about 45 million students. The higher education system in China is, in principle, the largest in the world (Ministry of Education of PRC 2021).

Conclusion

In both Russia and China, the governments of these countries play a leading role in the development of higher education. Both countries are making the transition from the Soviet education system to the Western model. Both countries had a number of similar problems in their higher education systems that needed to be overcome. China began the reform of its higher education system in its country earlier and spent a larger amount of money on its implementation. At the same time, the very mechanisms for reforming the higher education systems in Russia and China have much in common. The development programs of Russian and Chinese universities are also fundamentally very similar. The authors come to the conclusion that the success of development programs for Chinese universities was influenced by the innovative nature of the Chinese economy; more precisely, these 2 trends are interdependent. Chinese universities, compared to Russian ones, have more opportunities to commercialize their activities. The number of universities in China exceeds the number of Russian ones by 6 times, the number of students is more than 10 times higher, and China's growth potential is higher. Accordingly, the opportunities for leading Chinese universities to attract talented students are higher. China's higher education system is the largest in the world. China now has greater capacity to internationalize its higher education system. So, the question is why Chinese universities managed to take leading positions in world university rankings, while Russian universities failed to do this - initially contains some bias towards China, characteristic of the times of the late USSR, when Russia dominated in almost all spheres in relation to China. The position of China and Russia on the world stage has changed. Today China is the second economy in the world. China has the world's largest education system in the world, and has more opportunities to develop international cooperation.

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