

Internationalizing and International-benchmarking of Universities in East Asia:

Producing World Class University or Reproducing Neo- Imperialism in Education?

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Questing for Global Competitiveness and Search for New Governance

In order to enhance their global competitiveness, governments in different parts of the world have started to conduct comprehensive reviews of and implement plans to restructure their higher education systems (Mok & Welch, 2003). In response to the growing pressures generated by the globalization forces, modern states have attempted to reinvent themselves by moving beyond the welfare state to become the competition state (Gill, 1995; Moran, 2002; Jordana & Levi-Faur, 2005). Governments across different parts of the globe, facing similar competitive pressures, have undertaken regulatory reforms such as privatization or corporatization of state-owned industries or publicly owned organizations like post office and university, opening up new markets to multiple providers and the introduction of new regulatory regimes under the control of independent regulators (Drahos & Joseph, 1995; Levi-Faur, 1998; Scott, 2004). To enhance the efficiency of the public policy / public management, modern states may deregulate some areas while enforcing competition in others, hence becoming a facilitator or even a generator of markets. Thus, it is common to

witness the extent and the role of reregulation or recentralization in the processes of market restructuring is accompanied by the emergence of strong regulatory states and by the entrepreneurial role states play (Chan & Tan, 2006; Ng and Chan, 2006). Unlike Cerny's (1997) characterization of the competition state as a basically liberal state, Levi-Faur argues the state (particularly in the intensified global competitive environment, *my emphasis*) faces a paradox: "*the greater the commitment of the competition state to the promotion of competition, the deeper its regulation will be*" (Levi-Faur, 1998, p. 676). More importantly, the actions and mission of the competition state do not necessarily result in the retreat of the state from the market but rather a reassertion of the role of the state under changing social and economic circumstances (Levi-Faur, 1998, p. 676).

In order to promote basic national interests through the creation and enforcement of competition, the developmental states in Asia have taken the opportunity offered by the fundamental economic restructuring processes to transform them into "market accelerationist state" by proactively shaping the market institutions for the benefits of market creation (Mok, 2006; Lee, 2004). Unlike the regulatory state in America that evolved against a liberal market economy context, the regulatory state in Asia has emerged from a context of a combined strong state and a free market economy, by which the state ideologically commits to an "authoritarian mode of liberalism". As Jayasuriya has rightly pointed out, "this authoritarian liberalism presupposes the existence of a strong (or better described as politically illiberal) state with a capacity to regulate the economy" (2000, p. 329). In order to promote competition in the markets against the context of the authoritarian liberalism, a *market accelerationist state* is forming (Mok, 2006). The market accelerationist state has the features of a "dualistic state" as what Fraenkel (1941) described: a strong state combined with a liberal market economy. With this kind of state architecture in place, the success of the markets rests heavily upon the presence of strong regulatory institutions. It is against such a wider socio-political context that far more pro-competition policy instruments are adopted by modern states to transform the way public sector is governed. Hence, the higher education sector, like other public policy domains, has gone "private"; while ideas and strategies along the lines of neo-liberalism and economic

rationalism are increasingly influencing the way public policy is managed (Brehony & Deem, 2005; Neubauer, 2006). The socio-economic and socio-political environments outlined above have inevitably affected the way higher education is governed. In order to become globally competitive, governments and universities in Asia have started to search for new governance to improve university governance by the adoption of the corporatization and incorporation strategies of universities. In addition, they have taken the world university ranking very seriously and therefore they have engaged in questing for the “world-class” university status.

University Responses and Strategies

University restructuring: Incorporation and corporatization

Being unsatisfied with the conventional model along the lines of “state-oriented” and “highly centralized” approaches in higher education, Asian governments have recently tried to “incorporate” or introduced “corporatization” and “privatization” measures to run their state/national universities, believing that the transformations of which could make national universities more flexible and responsive to rapid socio-economic changes (Mok, 2006a; Oba, 2006). Instead of being closely directed by the Ministry of Education or equivalent government administrative bodies, state universities in Asia are now required to become more proactive and dynamic in looking for their own financial resources. Similar to their Australian and British counterparts, universities in Asia are now under constant pressures to become more “entrepreneurial” to look for alternative funding sources from the market, strengthening their partnerships with the industry and the business (Olsen & Gornitzka, 2006; Marginson & Considine, 2000).

Adhering more towards the market and corporate principles and practices, universities in Hong Kong are now run on a market-oriented and business corporation model. Universities of the city-state have experienced corporatization and privatization processes, whereby higher education institutions in Hong Kong have proactively engaged in fostering entrepreneurship to search for additional revenue sources from the market (Mok, 2005; Lee

& Gopinathan, 2005). In order to enhance efficiency of university governance, the University Grant Committee (UGC), the organization which shapes the directions of higher education development in Hong Kong, has recently subscribed to the notion of “deep collaboration” among universities, believing that synergy could be pulled together if universities in the city-state could better integrate. The UGC even supports university merging or other forms of restructuring to further establish Hong Kong as a regional center for excellence in research and scholarship (Lee, 2005; Chan, 2007).

Similarly, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has decided to change the statutory position of state universities into independent judicial entity by adopting principles and practices of corporatization. In order to reduce the state burden in higher education financing, all state universities in Taiwan have to generate additional funds from non-state sectors such as the market and enterprises. In order to generate sufficient funds to finance their institutions, various kinds of market driven strategies have been adopted. More recently, the Taiwan government has attempted to restructure its state universities by passing a new *University Act* to make state universities independent legal entities. Influenced by the Japan model, state universities in Taiwan have to establish new governance structures; while they are under immense pressures for searching additional financial support from the non-state channels especially when the Taiwan government has reduced significantly its funding to them (Lo & Weng, 2005; Tien, 2006).

In facing a new market economy context, the Chinese government has only found the old way of “centralized governance” in education inappropriate (Yang, 2002). Acknowledging that over-centralization and stringent rules would kill the initiatives and enthusiasm of local educational institutions, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) called for resolute steps to streamline administration, devolve powers to units at lower levels so as to allow them more flexibility to run education. In the last decade or so, higher education in the post-Mao era has experienced structural reforms ranging from curriculum design, financing, promotion of the private/*minban* sectors in higher education provision, to adopting strategies to

develop “world-class” universities. In order to promote the competitiveness of its higher education in the global marketplace, the Chinese government has introduced various kinds of restructuring exercises to merge universities or to streamline the stubbornly sustained bureaucratic university systems. With strong intention to identify and develop a few Chinese universities into “world-class” universities, the government has implemented various reform measures such “211 project” and “985 project” to concentrate state resources on a few selected top-tier national universities for boosting them to become leading universities in the world (Min, 2004; Mok 2005b; Lo & Chan, 2006; Chou, 2006).

Like societies in greater China, Japan is not immune from the impact of neo-liberalism, managerialism and economic rationalism, three major ideologies underlying the tidal wave of public sector reforms and reinventing government projects across the world. With the intentions to make its state university system more responsive and flexible in coping with intensified pressures generated from the growing impacts of globalization, the Japanese government has incorporated all state universities since 2004. Central to the transformation of the existing national universities into “National University Corporations” are three major reform aspects: increased competitiveness in research and education; enhanced accountability together with introduction of competition; and strategic and functional management of national universities (Oba, 2006).

Higher education restructuring is popular not only among East Asian states but also among Southeast Asian societies. Having reflected upon the changing university governance models and evaluated the recent experiences of SMU, the Ministry of Education in Singapore has decided to change the governance models of the existing state universities, namely, National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University by making them independent legal entity through the process of “corporatization” (Mok, 2005a; 2006b). By incorporatizing these state universities, the Singapore government hopes that universities on the island state could become more entrepreneurial. Similarly, public universities in Malaysia have started a similar project of “incorporation” and

“corporatization” of national universities since 1998. In the last few years, the private universities have grown in number, while the public universities are run like as corporations in Malaysia. According to Lee (2004), “the structural changes in the corporatized universities show that collegial forms of governance has been sidelined, entrepreneurial activities have increased, and corporate managerial practices have been institutionalized” (Lee, 2004, p. 15).

Questing for “World-Class” Status and University Ranking

With strong intentions to enhance their global competitiveness, governments and universities in Asia have taken university-ranking exercises very seriously. Recent studies have repeatedly shown that universities in East Asia are increasingly under pressures to compete internationally and research has obviously become one of the major yardsticks in measuring university performance. University leagues are not only popular in the USA and the UK; various Asian university systems have also launched their own university ranking movements (Liu & Cheng 2005; Research Center of Chinese Scientific Evaluation of Wuhan University, 2005; Zhejiang University, 2006).

Positioning itself as a regional hub of higher education, Hong Kong has placed heavy weight on research performance as such an importance has been reflected in the research performance-led funding formula adopted by the government. Since the 1990s, Hong Kong higher education has gone through several Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs), modelling the UK approach to monitoring research performance. Universities in Hong Kong have gone through major review exercises and they have been asked to differentiate themselves in terms of roles and missions, identifying major strengths and developing their centres of excellence. Academics currently working in Hong Kong are confronted with increasing pressures from the government to engage in international research, commanding a high quality of teaching and contributing to professional and community services. As Hong Kong universities have tried to benchmark with top universities in the world, they are struggling very hard to compete for limited resources, just as are

universities in central Europe (Kwiek, 2004). Under a “publish or perish” context, academics in Hong Kong are becoming more “instrumental” when choosing publication venues and therefore international Social Science (SSCI) and Science Citation (SCI) indexed journals are major targets for getting their works published; while university presidents/vice-chancellors in the city state are concerned with their institutions’ ranking in the global university league (Mok, 2005c; Chan, 2007).

In Taiwan, the government has realized that globalization has accelerated competition among higher education institutions globally. With intentions to improve the global competitiveness of Taiwan institutions, the Executive Yuan set out a policy target to develop at least one university in Taiwan as one of the top 100 universities in the world and at least 15 key departments or cross-university research centres will become the top in Asia within the next five years (Lu, 2004). With these policy objectives, the Ministry of education and the National Science Council have jointly launched the “Programme for Promoting Academic Excellence of Universities”, primarily aiming at improving universities’ infrastructure and invigorating research (MOE, 2000). Well aware of the importance of its international position, higher education institutions in Taiwan have attached far more weight to university ranking exercises. For instance, the Research Institute of Higher Education at Tamkang University has conducted university assessment studies in the last few years. University league tables have been produced and subsequent reports have aroused lots of debates in Taiwan (Lo & Weng, 2005; Research Institute of Higher Education and University Evaluation, 2005; Lo & Chan, 2006). Similar to Hong Kong, research assessment has dominated academic life in Taiwan. Despite the fact that the university sector in Taiwan has established the Taiwan Social Science Citation Index (TSSCI) in order to counter balance the pressures to publish only in SSCI journals, academics confront the reality that special weight is still attached to international publication venues in terms of promotion and research evaluations (Chen & Lo, in this issue).

In order to enhance the international competitiveness of Chinese universities in the globalizing world, the Chinese government has implemented a few major projects such as the

“211 Project” and the “985 Scheme” to enable some higher education institutions to become “world class universities”. For the “211 Project”, the government has attempted to develop 100 key universities and key disciplines in the 21st century with additional funding allocated to institutions of higher education to improve their teaching and research facilities (National Planning Commission et al., 2005); while the “985 Scheme” is to transform Beijing University (Peking University) and Tsinghua University, to be world class universities by 2015 and 2011 respectively. Realizing the intensified global competition among leading universities and feeling the pressure for better ranking in global university league, the Chinese government has strategically identified key national bases for humanities and social sciences research and major national laboratories have been established to promote scientific research (Huang, 2006). More recently, a research institute of higher education based in Shanghai has recently published a report on *The Academic Ranking of World Universities* which has drawn a great deal of attention and sparked considerable debate among academics in China (Liu & Cheng, 2005). In the context of questing for world-class universities in China, other research institutions in China like the Research Center of Chinese Scientific Evaluation of Wuhan University and College of Education, Zhejiang University have also conducted research of similar kinds to promote university assessment and performance (Research Centre of Chinese Scientific Evaluation of Wuhan University, 2005; Zhejiang University, 2006). Most recently, Ngok and Guo have critically reviewed the quest for world-class universities in China, pointing out the gap between the government policy goals and the reality. In their article, they report some mal-practices and even corruption among the academia resulting from the strong drives for obtaining the world-class status (Ngok and Guo, 2007)

In Japan, academics are becoming increasingly aware of the ranking exercises and therefore they have launched a “Flagship Universities” project to identify a few major Japanese universities and develop them as “world class universities”. According to Yonezawa (2006), consistent and protracted development of Japan’s higher education system has long been

driven by strong national initiatives since the late 19th century (Yonezawa, 2006). Heavily invested in its university systems, Japanese universities dominated the top echelons in *Asia Week’s* annual “Asian University Ranking”. Nonetheless, Japanese universities have only found their declining positions in both the regional university league and the global ones. After benchmarking with the world university rankings, the Japanese government has become very concerned about how to reposition Japanese universities in the rapidly changing global environment. Therefore, the government has devolved additional resources to promote internationalization and students and academics are strongly encouraged by the government to engage in international collaborations and exchanges (Furushiro, 2006; Yonezawa, 2006).

Similarly, universities in Singapore are becoming increasingly aware of their international standing. To strengthen Singapore as a regional hub of higher education, the government strategically identified major top universities over the world and invited them to set up their branch campuses in the city-state. In addition, the government has attempted to attract leading academics to collaborate with local scholars (Mok & Tan, 2004). Similar situations can be found in other Southeast societies like Malaysia, especially when the university system there has been going through restructuring along the lines of “neo-liberalism” and the present government is very keen to make Malaysia a regional hub of higher education. More overseas academics will be appointed to the system and international collaborations with overseas institutions in terms of research and teaching has received strong support for the state (Interviews with Professor S. Morshidi and Mr. Abdul Razak, April 2006, Malaysia).

Impacts of “World-Class University” on National Higher Education Systems

Centralized Decentralization in University Governance

Our above discussion has indicated how different Asian societies have interpreted the notion of “world-class” university and in

what way their higher education systems have responded to the growing impacts of world university ranking. Other recent research has also reported a few major measures being adopted by universities in Asian societies to restructure and transform the university governance through the processes of “incorporation” and “corporatization”. Jun Oba’s recent work provides a clear policy background for enlightening us about why and how Japanese universities have gone through the process of “incorporation”. Unsatisfied with the “centralized” governance model in university governance, the Japanese government has amended its university law to turn all state universities into independent legal entities and they are supposedly given more financial and management autonomy in order to make the systems more responsive to rapid changes. My recent fieldwork conducted in Japan has revealed that although state universities have gone “incorporated” but front-line academics have not really experienced genuine changes while university senior management has enjoyed relative flexibility in financial matters (Fieldwork in Japan, January 2006). Oba’s article has pointed out the reality and prospects of the incorporation project in Japan, indicating the difficulties involved in changing the highly state-regulated university sector in Japan.

Similar to Japan, universities in Hong Kong and Singapore have been experiencing restructuring exercises. In the case of Hong Kong, the post-East Asian financial crisis had significantly affected the finance of the university sector by 2004. Facing severe government budget cuts, the university sector in Hong Kong had to venture in different kinds of income generation activities by launching more self-funded programmes and turning their research into commercial products (Lee, 2005). In addition, universities in Hong Kong have been under great pressures to perform well internationally by asserting their world-class status through international publications (Mok, 2005). In their recent paper, Jan Currie and Carole Peterson review the “Robert Chung Affair” and the “Amendment of Basic Law”, as well as discussing how the university sector in Hong Kong has experienced significant restructuring and governance change. More specifically, they have highlighted in their piece that in what way academic freedom is affected under the

pressures of higher education restructuring (Peterson and Currie, 2007). Like Hong Kong, Singapore’s higher education system has gone through significant transformations, particularly when the government has attempted to introduce internal competition to the university sector in order to enhance the efficiency and competitiveness of the system. Michael Lee and Saravanan Gopinathan examine critically what have been achieved and what are the problems resulting from the university restructuring in Singapore. One of the major challenges that universities in Singapore are facing is the dilemma between “accountability” and “autonomy”. The paper of Lee and Gopinathan again shows how decentralization has gone hands in hands with recentralization, resulting in more control of the state on university governance in the context of quality assurance and international benchmarking (Lee and Gopinathan, 2007).

The introduction of more market-oriented and neo-liberalist principles and measures to reform the university governance originally intends to empower universities to manage their business with more flexibility and autonomy. But comparative and international experiences of university governance reforms have suggested the adoption of decentralization; marketization and corporatization strategies have not really liberated universities. Instead, academics and university administrators have only found themselves confronted with intensified pressures to prove their performance through the implementation of quality assurance / international benchmarking / performance assessment. Hence, it is not surprising that the implementation of decentralization in university governance has resulted in re-regulation and recentralization through various kinds of accountability measures and performance checks. A strong tide of “centralized decentralization” has significantly affected the way contemporary universities are governed. It is against this context that a growing number of academics have begun to complain about the academic freedom being threatened as a result of the decentralization and corporatization of universities.

The Danger of Neo-Imperialism in Education

In recent years, universities in South Korea have also gone

through the process of restructuring. More market principles and practices are introduced in the university sector with the intentions to improve the university governance. Terri Kim has offered a critical analysis of how universities in South Korea are incorporated, identifying the key issues which the universities in South Korea are confronting. But one point which deserves attention here is that unlike other Asian university systems which have experienced reductions in state funding (except Singapore), the South Korea government has increased its financial support to the university sector in order to boost a few universities in South Korea to climb up the world university ranking. For example, Kansei University aspiring to move up the global university league table, the university has issued a new personnel policy to recruit faculties from overseas to teach instead of appointing the local ones. This new staffing policy has raised deep concerns in South Korea (Kim, 2006).

Similarly, Taiwan and Mainland China have also seen the importance of the world university league tables and, therefore, different strategies are devised to enhance their universities to be more globally visible. Kinglun Ngok and Weiqing Guo (2007) critically reflect upon how Chinese universities have been affected by the quest for “world-class” university movement. They argue in their article that 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 China can catch up with the world-class universities through the strong intervention by the government, especially the huge extra funding from the government. Such a way of thinking reflects the path-dependence in Chinese policy process. They conclude the article by arguing that the establishment of China’s world-class universities entails the reshaping of state-university relationship and restructuring of university governance. They also believe it is hard for Chinese universities to become world-class without academic freedom and university freedom (Ngok and Guo, 2007). Strongly feeling the impacts of the quest for the “world-class” university movement, it is not surprising that some academics in China have regarded themselves being forced to become “prostitutes” especially when they are imposed with the

benchmarking with the internationally refereed publications while local or national publications are getting less recognition (Vidovich, Yang & Currie, 2007).

Like China, academics in Taiwan have also encountered similar pressures for research assessment and international benchmarking. My visits and field interviews with academics in Taiwan have repeatedly reported that higher education institutions are under tremendous pressures for becoming more internationalized, while academics continue to experience the “publish or perish” phenomenon. Dorothy Chen and William Lo offer a critical review on research assessment and international benchmarking in Taiwan, arguing that the quality assurance movement taking place in Taiwan has undermined not only academic freedom of academics but also the values of Asian scholarship. Putting the observations of these papers together, it is clear that higher education systems in Asia are under great pressures to perform in line with the “standards” prescribed by the Anglo-Saxon traditions. Evidences presented in the following articles will indicate how educational restructuring reforms taking place in Asia have been significantly influenced by western new managerial-oriented doctrines and neo-liberalist ideologies and practices. Responding to the growing impact of globalization, all the East Asian states considered here have reviewed their education systems and launched reforms along the lines of marketization, privatization and corporatization with the intention of improving their governance and management (Chen and Lo, 2007).

In addition, international benchmarking and intensifying competition for ranking in the “Global University League” has inevitably influenced the way that Asian universities are governed. Nonetheless, we should not simply understand “internationalization” in Asia as merely as following the American or Anglo-Saxon standards and practices. Although the academic communities in Europe and the United States have been regarded as more “advanced” than the Asian counterparts, higher education institutions in general and academics in particular must critically reflect on to what extent and in what way the so called “good practices” identified from the West can really integrate well with non-western education systems.

Despite the fact that many of the Asian societies discussed here have been “de-colonized” after the Second World War, many of them have not really “de-colonized” in practice, since most of them have been influenced strongly by Anglo-Saxon standards or ideologies. The introduction of English as the medium of instruction, the adoption of curricula from Australia, the UK and the USA, sending home students to study overseas and establishing international exchanges, coupled with the quest for the world class universities as predominately defined by the Anglo-Saxon world, have not only created a new “dependency culture” but also reinforced the American dominated “hegemony”, particularly in relation to league tables, citation indexes and the kind of research which counts as high status. Asian societies seem to have treated “internationalization” as “westernization” and “modernization” or “Americanization” since the 19th century (Mok, 2007).

Analyzing such “internationalization experiences” in the light of Kazuhiro Ebuchi’s (1997) framework, “internationalization” could be interpreted as an “intransitive verb” or a “transitive verb”, the concept of “internationalization as a transitive verb” in English “is a historical concept, which emerged from a nation with ‘hegemony’ in the international order, while that of ‘internationalization as an intransitive verb’ is one from a ‘smaller nation’ which was forced to follow a ‘larger nation’” (Ebuchi, 1997). Thus not only European but also Asian states should be aware of the differences between policy learning and policy copying. If we copy policy practices without proper adaptation and careful contextualization, we might easily encounter problems, including in Asia, a process of re-colonization, resulting in reproducing learning experiences which do not fit the specific cultural and political environments in the East. Therefore, we need to critically examine the following questions when attempting to internationalize universities: can the standards and practices commonly available in the West be coherently adapted to Asian traditions and cultures? Would the adoption of such western practices be distorted especially without properly contextual analysis? Most important of all, would there be only one “international standard” as defined solely by or even dominated by, the Anglo-

Saxon paradigm? Who should be involved in defining the “international benchmarks”? Without proper contextualization, the adoption of such “global trendy strategies” or “global reform measures” may be proved to be counterproductive

Conclusion: Walking in Two Legs

In conclusion, I hope with such critical reflections we may become more aware of the danger of new imperialism. Living in a post-colonial context, Asian scholars should be more critical about what they have learned from the West, guarding against the logic of becoming ‘globalized’ meaning ‘Americanized’. Following the global practices and ideologies without developing our own unique systems and honouring the rich traditions, cultures and scholarships of East Asia may easily lead us to entering the processes of ‘re-colonization’. Perhaps, Asian scholars are not confident enough as what the previous Prime Minister of Malaysia suggested. Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, ‘most Asians have not been able to get over the feelings of inferiority that decades and centuries of colonialism have brought in them. They are politically independent but psychologically they are still colonized. The desire to please the non-Asians is strong among them. Their value system and their way of thinking are still very much dominated by Western thinkers’ (Mahathir, cited in Yeh 2004: 37). If it is the case, we should be confident in our systems and be proud of our cultures and traditions. In this regard, learning from other systems is desirable but we should guard against copying without proper adaptation and contextualization. Most important of all, Asia has rich traditions and cultures and we should never look down upon our rich scholarly traditions. I strongly believe scholars in Asia should ‘walk in two legs’, internalizing our academic systems, on the one hand, and cultivating and developing our own paradigms, on the other. Internationalizing with East Asian characteristics would be a far more challenging and we must

commit ourselves to develop alternative academic paradigms for promoting cross-cultural understanding and cross-national policy learning.

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