

Changes in Higher Education Policies: A Case Study of Projects in China

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Abstract:

Many measures have been taken to promote the development of higher education by the Chinese government since 1978. This study examined the projects launched by the Chinese government to improve the quality of higher education and elevate the status of targeted institutions to world-class universities. The policies reviewed include Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-rate University Plan. By examining the implementation of these projects, this study aimed to understand if the policy goals sought by the government were achieved. The conceptual framework used to analyze the projects included Lowi's theory of distribution and McDonnell and Elmore's typology of policy instruments. This study found that the projects demonstrated characteristics unique to China and that they focused on efficiency, quality, and equality.

Key Words: Double First-Class plan, Policy implementation, Project 211, Project 985

Since governmental reforms and opening-up of the country in the late 1970s, China¹ has changed in many aspects. Fast forwarding to 2010 finds that China passed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy behind the United States². Closely linked to the development of an economy of a country is the education of its citizens, especially higher education (Schultz, 1971). In order to promote the development of the economy and benefits to society, the Chinese government recently placed a great deal of focus on higher education. This study investigated the outcomes of governmental actions to achieve the goal of building world-class universities.

To promote the development of higher education, the Chinese government has issued a series of policies and projects. Beginning in 1999, the government started to take actions to promote equity in higher education through the scaled expansion of the sector. Concurrent with this goal, the government also set the goal to increase the quality of some universities and to be more competitive in the world through a series of targeted projects.

1. PROJECT 211: SCALING UP HIGHER EDUCATION

In order to improve the ability of scientific research and international competitiveness of some universities, the largest expansion project in the higher education³ sector since the founding of New China was started. With the approval of the State Council, Project 211 was officially launched in November, 1995. Project 211 included a construction project of approximately 100 universities and a number of key disciplines to meet 21st century challenges. Outcomes included the construction of key disciplines, expansion of the public service system, and improvement of overall conditions of the universities. The Memorandum of Project 211 issued in 2005, reported a total of 112 public universities were funded under Project 211, among them, four universities had two campuses sharing the same name in the project, which therefore brings the tally of new universities to 116.

This project went through three phases. Zhao Lu, the director of the Education, Science and Culture Department under the Ministry of Finance, reported that 2.755 billion yuan was earmarked by the central government in the first phase of Project 211, and 6 billion yuan was allocated for the second phase⁴. Funding for the third phase of construction totaled 10 billion yuan, with 5 billion yuan earmarked for each the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the Ministry of Finance (MOF). Funding increased for each of the phases of the Project 211.

The success of the project goals to scale up access to higher education is evident in the growth of postgraduate training. In 2005, postgraduate training was 6.2 times higher than in 1995, and

¹ In this study, China refers to the mainland of China, Taiwan, Hongkong and Macao are not included.

² China Passes Japan as Second-Largest Economy.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/16/business/global/16yuan.html>

³ Introduction of Project 211 http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A22/xwb_left/moe_843/tnull_33122.html

⁴ Over 10 billion yuan to be invested in Project 211. <http://en.people.cn/90001/6381319.html>

the universities of Project 211 had undertaken four fifths of doctoral training, two thirds of postgraduate training, half of international students training as well as one third of undergraduate training⁵ from 1995 to 2005. Clearly, scaling up of higher education occurred between the start of the Project 211 in 1999 and today. This foundation provided a launching point for the next project, Project 985.

2. PROJECT 985: EXPANDING SUCCESS

In May, 1998, Jiang Zemin, former chairman of China, proposed at the Peking University centennial celebration conference that “in order to realize modernization, China should have a number of first-class universities with world-class levels.”⁶ At the end of the same year, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued *the Action Plan for Education Revitalization in the 21st Century*, which gave priority to supporting targeted institutions of higher learning to create first-class universities and disciplines with world-class levels. This focus builds on the initial attention to quality started in Project 211.

In January 1999, the plan was approved by the State Council and Project 985 was officially launched. A total of 39 prestigious public universities, which are also universities in Project 211, were identified as the national key high-level universities under this project. Central to this project was a focus on building strong infrastructures for these institutions. The Chinese government targeted mechanism innovation, team building, platform and base building, condition support, and international exchange and cooperation in the quest to construct this set of world-class universities and high-level universities.

Like Project 211, Project 985 was also divided into three phases. The Ministry of Education (MOE) signed cooperation agreements with local governments within some provinces and municipalities. The investment for this project reached 25.5 billion yuan, of which the central special fund invested more than 14 billion yuan for the first phase of the project, between 1999 and 2002. The second phase of investment totaled 42.6 billion yuan, of which the central government invested 18.9 billion yuan, and the departments and local governments invested 14 billion yuan, and the institutions raised 9.7 billion yuan. In the third period of the Project 985, more than 45 billion yuan was invested, with the central government’s special funds investing 26.49 billion yuan, and the local government supporting funds reaching 18.633 billion yuan, which was 102% and 93% higher, respectively, than the first phase of the Project 985⁷. The data show that the investment of Project 985 was greater relative to funding for Project 211.

⁵ The Ministry of Education introduces the achievements of Project 211 and the third phase of the project. http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2008-03/26/content_928987.htm

⁶ Jiang Zemin's speech at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of Peking University <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/jiaoyu/8216/2702275.html>

⁷ A Brief Introduction to Key Joint Construction Contracts for the New Round of Project 985. <http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s7045/201212/146215.html>

Project 985 was built on the basis of the accomplishments of Project 211, which allowed the Project 985 to reach higher levels of outcomes. For example, Peking University had a total construction fund amount from the first phase of Project 211 of 125 million yuan, whereas the funds obtained from the first phase of Project 985 were 1.8 billion yuan⁸. The Chinese government committed to an increase in investment to promote the development of higher education and improve the competitiveness of its universities among other institutions of higher education across the world.

3. DOUBLE FIRST-RATE UNIVERSITY PLAN: NEW BEGINNING

In 2016, the MOE announced the ending of Project 985 and Project 211, which resulted in individuals being uncertain of the next actions of governmental support for universities in China. In September 2017, the MOE, Ministry of Finance (MOF), and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) jointly issued the *Notice on the publication of a list of universities and disciplines in the World first-class Universities and First-class Disciplines*. This report officially confirmed the publication of a list of universities selected for participation in the construction of world-class universities and first-class disciplines. Included on this list are 140 colleges and universities, including a sub-set of 42 public universities identified for development as a top university around the world. A total of 465 dual-class disciplines were identified, including 44 self-determined disciplines. A total of 95 public universities are expected to break into the world's first-class disciplines⁹, which is called the Double First-rate University Plan.

According to the governmental reports, the implementation measures set out to support these world class universities and disciplines includes three phases, beginning in 2017 and concluding in 2050. The first step in the project is to develop a number of world-class universities and a group of first-class disciplines by the year of 2020. The second step occurs from 2020 to 2030, and then follows the third step from 2030 to 2050. The Double First-rate University Plan is a new national plan with a focused scope that is intended to deeply influence the higher education sector in China. The 2017 report by the 19th National Congress underscores the commitment to the aspirations in the country's higher education sector. More funds are intended for investment by the central government to achieve the world-class universities and first -rate disciplines designations.

Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-rate University Plan are among the most important projects launched by the Chinese government that apply to the higher education

⁸ National Strategies Towards World-class Universities.

http://www.jyb.cn/high/gjzd/200909/t20090928_313808_3.html

⁹ Notice on the publication of a list of universities and disciplines in the World first-class Universities and First-class Disciplines http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A22/moe_843/201709/t20170921_314942.html

sector. The plans to develop several world-class universities and a series of first-rate disciplines have been supported by increasing levels of funding by the central government and local government. What remains unknown is the value of these projects for the country and the effects of these projects on the economy. To answer these questions, several perspectives were used for analysis.

4. POLICY ANALYSIS

This study looked at the different projects using several approaches. First, a look at the culture and values held by Chinese citizens was used. How does a collectivism perspective influence the examination of the projects? Second, a look at efficiency helps to understand how the projects have scaled up and to determine if improvements could be made in the process. Third, a look at the quality of project outcomes occurs. Finally, the projects were analyzed from an equality perspective.

Chinese cultural characteristics. The guiding ideology in Project 211, Project 985, as well as the Double First-rate University Plan, reflects a focus on national interests regarding the contributions of higher education to the public good. For example, in *Overall Construction Planning of Project 211* issued in 1995, the motivation for the project was as a necessary measure taken by the nation to promote the development of higher education to promote the adaptation of higher education to economic and social development. This goal underscored the need to prepare high-level, talented graduates to contribute to China's economic and social development. Similarly, the first intention of Project 985 was to further support national goals, in particular working to build capacity of higher education graduates to become on par with others around the world and enhance the country's competitiveness. Again, the overarching contributions to the public good were central to the Project 985.

The guiding ideology apparent in the past projects was at the core of the Double First-rate University Plan as well. A goal of the plan to build world-class universities and first-class disciplines plan includes the desire to train the contributors and successors of socialism with Chinese cultural characteristics, and to better serve the socialist modernization through service to citizens. The amount of financial support for the projects provides evidence of the commitment of the Chinese government to supporting higher education, in particular focusing on creating a group of world-class universities and first-class disciplines, that will support advances for all Chinese citizens. The concentrated focus on a limited number of institutions versus even support for all institutions underscores the role of communal focus in Chinese culture. The benefits of the whole outweigh a focus on equal resources for all institutions, which aligns with the features of socialism in operation in the country.

Efficiency. It is clearly stated in the *Action Plan for Education Revitalization in the 21st Century* in 1998 that a goal of concentrating the country's limited financial resources to select institutions of higher learning and disciplines capable of reaching international status would

efficiently use national investments.¹⁰ As a socialist country, China seeks to concentrate investments to benefit the country. Thus, mobilizing resources and forming synergies were a strategic choice and a distinctive feature of Project 985.

A total of 3.98% of colleges and universities in China benefitted from the 211 and 985 projects. There are a total 2914 institutions of higher education in China, of which 2631 are general institutions of higher learning and 283 are adult institutions of higher learning.¹¹ With the Double First-rate University Plan, China intends to give priority over the next five years to 140 colleges and universities among these 2914 higher institutions. These selected universities will receive more national investment, similar to targeted funding under former 211 and 985 projects. According to public data from 2009 to 2013, universities in 211 and 985 projects received 70% of the national government research funds. Project 211 universities received 51.066 billion yuan, whereas Project 985 universities received more than double this amount (139.494 billion yuan). Altogether, the remaining universities received only 28% of the national funding dedicated to higher education (74.21 billion yuan).¹²

Specifically, among the participating universities in the 211 and 985 projects, Tsinghua University and Peking University benefitted the most. For example, Tsinghua University received the largest amount of scientific research funds (a total of 3.991 billion yuan), which is 23 times as much as government funding for Southwest Petroleum University. The latter received only had 460 million, but notably was allocated the most research funding among the general colleges and universities.¹³

The selected universities in the Double First-rate University Plan receive preferential treatment in education policies. Tsinghua University and Peking University are subsidized by 5 billion yuan a year, and Zhejiang University ranks third with 4.5 billion yuan. Other top universities are supported with a minimum of 1.8 billion yuan. This distribution of grants highlights preferential funding for some universities among the project universities. Efficiency was stressed in these projects via targeted funding.

Quality. With the implementation of 211 and 985 projects, some universities changed and developed significantly. One measure of quality is international rankings. The Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings uses 13 calibrated performance indicators to provide a comprehensive comparison, although some question the rationality of university rankings (Guo, 2015). Figure one highlights the changes among Chinese universities in THE

¹⁰ The *Action Plan for Education Revitalization in the 21st Century*
http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_177/200407/2487.html

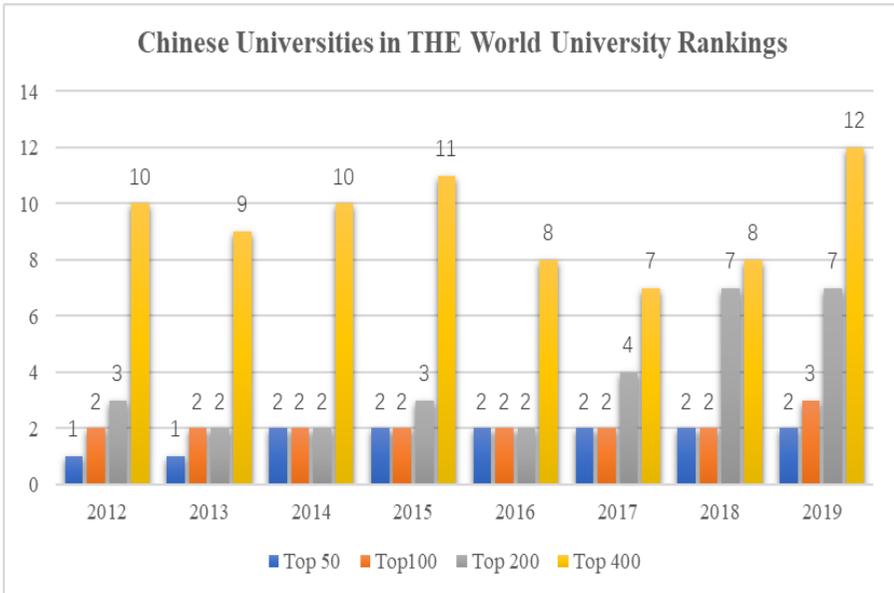
¹¹ List of National Institutions of Higher Learning
http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A03/moe_634/201706/t20170614_306900.html

¹² The 20-year dispute between Project 211 and Project 985 universities: the difference of financial allocation is 23 times. <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/20141205/224421010203.shtml>

¹³ The 20-year dispute between Project 211 and Project 985 universities: the difference of financial allocation is 23 times. <http://finance.sina.com.cn/china/20141205/224421010203.shtml>

rankings from 2012 to 2019. Since 2014, Tsinghua University and Peking University have climbed into the top 50 universities. Additionally, a steady rise in Chinese universities among the top 100 universities occurred over time. There is also an upward trend in the number of Chinese universities in the top 200 universities. Overall, the THE data highlights that Chinese universities have steadily risen in world rankings since the implementation of Project 211 and Project 985.

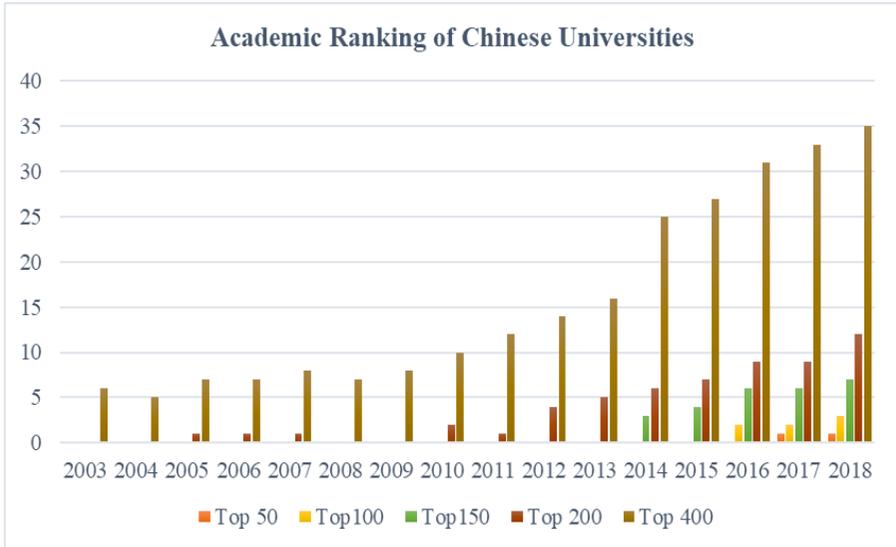
Figure 1. Chinese universities in THE world university rankings



To further investigate the role of quality among Chinese universities, data from Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), which uses six objective indicators based on academic or research performance to rank world universities, provides another measure. Figure two below shows a gradual rise in the number of Chinese universities in ARWU rankings from 2003 to 2018. The number of Chinese universities in the top 400 and the top 200 shows an increasing trend. In 2003, the number of Chinese universities in the top 400 included six universities and zero were among the top 200. Whereas, in 2018 the representation in these two categories increased to 35 and 12 respectively. Notably, there were no Chinese universities in the top 150 for the first 10 years reported in these rankings, but in 2014 a few Chinese universities began to climb into top 150 and more have ascended to this echelon since then. In 2016, Chinese universities broke into the top 100, and Tsinghua University ascended into the top 50 in 2017. The overall trend illustrates increased recognition of Chinese universities

among competitors around the world over the last 16 years since targeted national funding started.

Figure 2. Changes of Chinese universities in ARWU from 2003 to 2018



Furthermore, in the 2019 QS global university ranking¹⁴ for the top 1000, there are 40 universities on the list in mainland of China, all of which are universities in former 985 and 211 projects, including 31 universities in former Project 985 and nine universities in former Project 211. All of the universities in Project 985 and Project 211 are now recognized as world-class universities, which was an aim of the former 985 and 211 projects. The implementation of 211 and 985 projects achieved the goal of moving institutions of higher education into the world arena.

Equality. The 211 and 985 projects were implemented by means of administrative orders and financial allocations. The distribution of universities in these two projects helped promote equality between different regions. China’s economic regions are divided into four regions: the eastern, central, western and northeastern regions, according to the National Bureau of Statistics in 2011.¹⁵ The following figures demonstrate the distribution of universities under different projects.

¹⁴ <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2019>

¹⁵ Division method of east, west, central and northeast regions

http://www.stats.gov.cn/zjtj/zthd/sjtjr/dejtjkfr/tjpk/201106/t20110613_71947.htm

Figure 3. Distribution of 116 universities in Project 211

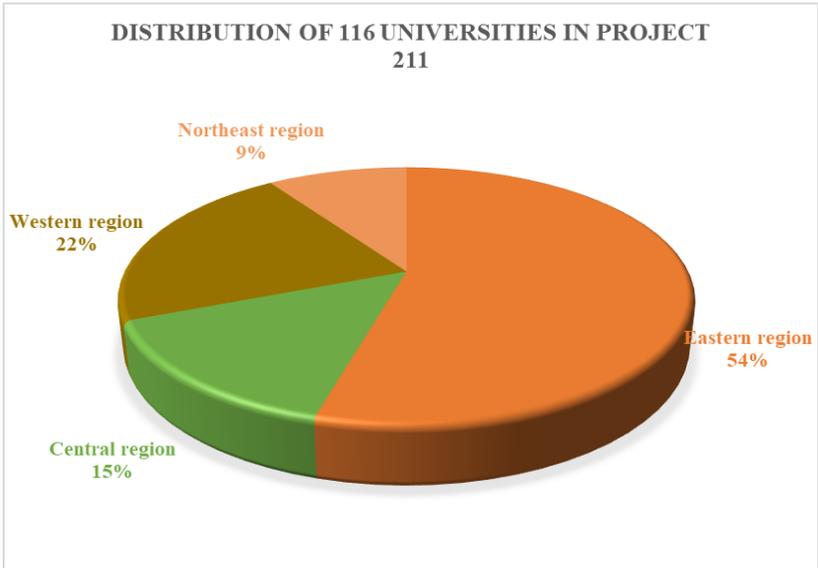


Figure 4. Distribution of 39 universities in Project 985

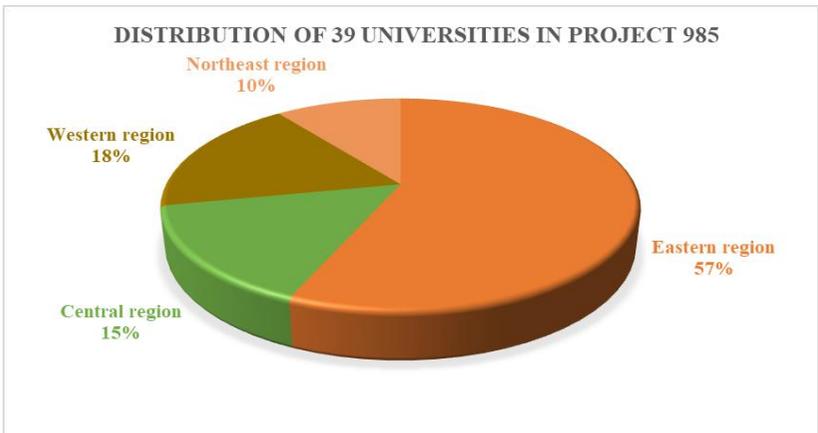
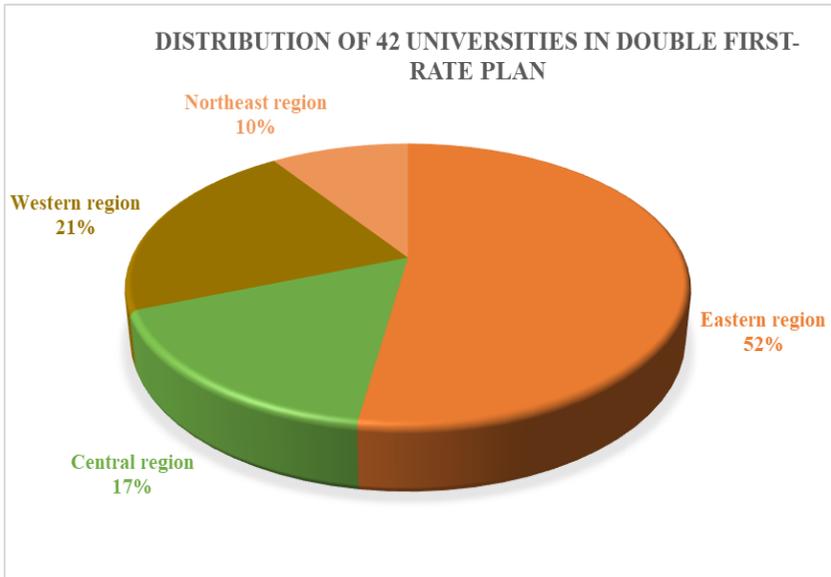
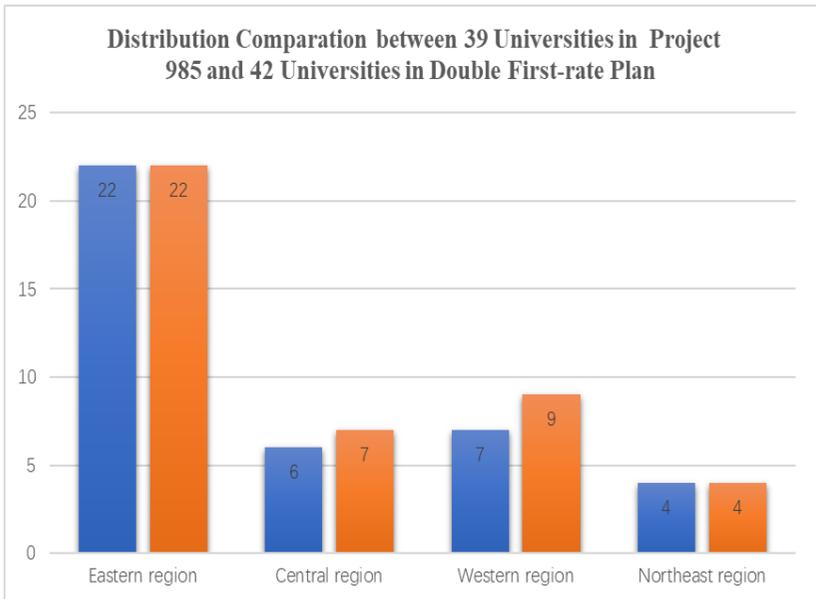


Figure 5. Distribution of 42 universities in Double First-rate Plan



These figures above clearly show that more than half of the universities received project funding are distributed in eastern region of China, indicating a gap exists between the different regions. Over time, the distribution of universities in the eastern region saw a decline, while the percentage of universities in central region show a slightly increase in Double First-rate University Plan. Comparing with Project 211 and Project 985, the new Chinese funding plan reflects the intention of equality between different regions.

Figure 6. Distribution Comparison between 39 Universities in Project 985 and 42 Universities in Double First-rate Plan



The Double First-rate University Plan includes more universities in the central and western region, while the number of universities in eastern and northeast of China remains the same. For the first time, three universities, Zhengzhou University, Yunnan University and Xinjiang University, non-985 universities, were jointly selected as world-class universities under the Double First-rate University Plan. Zhengzhou University in Henan province is included in the new funding project. Henan Province has the third largest population in China, with more than 94 million people, but had not been included in the former Project 985.

The history and growth rages of higher education in the provinces and regions differ, resulting in an absolute educational gap between regions. The imbalance between regions is becoming starker (Yan, 2006). Therefore, the distribution of universities in the new plan represents an attempt to balance the development of higher education in different regions.

5. DISCUSSION

Using Lowi's (1964) theory of distributive policies highlights how the Chinese government seeks to manage institutions of higher education and achieve its national goals. Specifically, the funding programs, including 211 and 985 projects as well as the Double First-rate University Plan, have been implemented by the government through grants and contracts. In China, about 100 universities in 211 and 985 projects received special subsidies from the central government or provincial governments, and these resources were far greater than those of other colleges and

universities¹⁶. China redistributed funding to a small, select group of universities. Those universities not receiving the grants were less supported and largely ignored by the central government.

A difference lies in that the focus on disciplines rather than on universities with the ending of the 211 and 985 projects and the implementation of Double First-rate University Plan. The historic and relatively stable ecological pattern of universities in China is changing due to the increasing gulf between first-class universities and non-first-class universities. In the new plan, the central government intends to redistribute resources from the larger group of universities to a smaller group (Lowi, 1994). The newly launched Double First-rate University Plan once issued may generate new conflicts among selected universities and between chosen universities and non-chosen universities.

Many Chinese enterprises and institutions, as well as some foreign enterprises in China, seek employees who have graduated from one of the universities in the 211 and 985 projects. Those without this academic background find more difficulty obtaining a decent job. Parents favor the universities in these projects due to their excellent faculty, ample resources, and the effects of prestigious universities with competitive tuition fees; students are under great pressure to be admitted by these universities. Therefore, an issue remains regarding the relationship between the universities selected in projects and the rest of universities. The future role of the universities not included in the national projects requires further exploration.

The new plan is not a replacement of the former projects, but a reshuffle of support for the designated prestigious universities. According to McDonnell and Elmore's (1987) typology, the transfer of money for the purpose of investment in material, intellectual, or human resources can be defined as capacity building. Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-rate University Plan are implemented to bring about improvement in Chinese universities and competitiveness around the world. These projects encourage selected public universities to build capacity by offering funds and favorable policies. Ultimately, the plan will take more than 30 years to achieve the goal, which represents a long-term investment whose full impact will not be apparent for years.

Different from the former projects, the Double First-rate University Plan makes it clear that the construction of double first-class universities is a construction cycle every five years, and the construction of colleges and universities will adopt total quantity control, open competition, and dynamic adjustment. The new plan stipulates that it is not a fixed status to be first-rate as the participating universities will receive monitoring and oversight management. If the institution does not meet its intended goals and becomes unqualified, it will be eliminated from participation in the plan. A potential issue is the length of time required to build up to world-class universities and disciplines status. Having the competition between universities occur

¹⁶ The controversy over the preservation and abolition of 985 and 211 projects reflects the dilemma of university reform in China. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/1201/c1001-26128114.html>

every five years may result in the loss of support before the capability has been built within this short timeframe.

6. CONCLUSION

The universities included in Project 211 as well as Project 985 are all included in the Double First-rate University Plan. The Double First-rate University Plan reflects a high level of continuity of policies that build on the former projects. Yet, the Double First-rate University Plan differs from the previous projects given the level of autonomy the government allows universities to self-determine program outcomes and planning processes. The rise of China's economy demands an educated workforce, which highlights the government's support of higher education and the new demands for accountability by the government of the universities. It is important to note how the various projects incorporate Chinese cultural features, which differ from other countries. The Double First-class Plan places more emphasis on the central and western regions to help elevate existing disparities among the regions, yet change will take time. Currently, the eastern region still possesses the most abundant resources in higher education for a long time.

Early data analysis on university outcomes highlights that the initial goals of Project 211 and Project 985 show an increase in prestige for several universities in China. In 2018, a total of 51 Chinese universities were listed among top 500 in the Shanghai World ranking of institutions. The targeted funding on a select sub-sample of universities in China to focus on achieving global recognition has paid off. Continued research is required to determine if this trajectory continues into the future, in particular given the aspirational goals and plans underway that reach out to 2050.

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