The Ranking Game

William Yat Wai LO [a] and Ryan ALLEN [b]
[a] The Education University of Hong Kong
[b] Chapman University

Introduction

Higher education is increasingly framed in a broad strategy for internationalization, as globalization has reshaped the global landscape of higher education where the operation of universities has transcended national borders. In the context of the knowledge economy, higher education is considered a key component of national competitiveness, as it is important in terms of enhancing a nation's knowledge-producing and talent-attracting capacity. Based on these theoretical understandings of the global nature of higher education, the literature highlights the significance of global competition in understanding contemporary higher education development (see Marginson, 2006; Shahjahan and Morgan, 2016 for the theoretical exploration of such competition for talent in knowledge production).

This chapter analyses the prevalence of global university rankings within this context of the intensification of global competition in higher education and the associated call for developing world-class universities in Asia. Focusing on the cases of Western Anglophone countries, the literature considers neoliberal ideology and its pro-market practices important forces driving internationalization of higher education (e.g. Hazelkorn, 2008). According to this neoliberalization thesis, elite universities are differentiated and assigned to establish and maintain a country's status as a global higher education power, while mass universities are responsible for commercial provision of higher education, thereby enlarging the country's share in the global higher education market (Marginson, 2006). Thus, university rankings are seen as an important information tool helping international students choose their destinations and institutions. In a similar vein, partnerships, scholar exchanges, and other international collaborations hinge upon identifying peer partner institutions abroad. The top-ranked universities mostly choose to partner with institutions other highly ranked institutions. Under these conditions, institutions consider their participation in global university rankings as part of their international marketing campaign targeted at multiple actors, both domestically and internationally (Hazelkorn, 2015).

However, this chapter suggests that, different to the neoliberalization thesis, the global competition within the Asian context is largely grounded on the theories of late development and developmental states, which considers higher education internationalization a way to sustain and enhance national competitiveness. In other words, the national goal of internationalizing higher education is to catch up and compete with the advanced nations. Thus, Asian countries and their universities endeavor to catch up with the standards of the Western academic model, which is perceived to be more advanced. These national desires have eschewed governmental cuts to higher education spending that have dominated Anglo-Western discourse. Instead, governments in the Asian region have poured funding into their universities, especially those on the elite end of the spectrum, with a keen focus on international league table positioning (Deem et al., 2008).

The chapter further explains that such a desire to catch up with Western higher education justifies the region-wide call for building world-class universities. Indeed, several Asian societies (e.g. Mainland China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Malaysia) encourage their national top universities to pursue an image of a world-class university, with which the

universities are able to earn an internationally recognized status and become competitive in the global competition for students, staff and funding. Then, global university rankings are employed by some of the Asian governments as a policy instrument to measure and monitor the performance of universities and to steer their higher education sectors towards a global standard. Specifically, whilst the model of Western higher education in general and that of American research-intensive university in particular are widely adopted as a benchmark, university rankings are used to indicate and monitor the gap between Asian universities and their counterparts in the West (Marginson, 2017).

Finally, the chapter illustrates an antinomy of the power of global university rankings. On the one hand, the use of numerical terms in university rankings effectively illustrates a simplified image of world-class university and creates a uniform but open space of competition where universities are provided with a clear pathway to academic and research excellence. On the other hand, given that the data for the measurement in ranking systems are heavily drawn from English-language scientific production (e.g. publishing in indexed English international academic journals), scholarly diversity is significantly narrowed. This homogenizing effect exemplifies the closedness of university rankings. Some literature further conceptualizes such favor to numerical criteria as a form of Western hegemony in higher education (e.g. Marginson, 2009; Lo, 2011). Even under the consideration that ranking culture had manifested locally, global benchmarks still often focus on a Western comparison. On this conceptual basis, the prevalence of university rankings and their strong influence over national higher education policy represent an institutionalization of Western hegemony, which leads to an intensification of hierarchical differentiation and stratification at both national and global levels. As a result, as shown in the cases of the five selected Asian societies, the disparity between institutions within national higher education systems is widened because of the policies of differentiation and fund concentration. At the global level, as the Western hegemony is legitimized, the unequal global higher education landscape is strengthened. However, some changes (e.g. reemphasizing local relevance and local connection) over the past few years have led signs of a shift of focus from catching up to the West to combining indigenous and Western knowledge. We suggest that this shift may indicate a new era for Asian universities.

Prevalence of the Ranking Game

By the early 2000s, domestic rankings such as schemes produced by *U.S. News & World Report* in the US and the *Times Good University Guide* in the UK already dominated their respective sectors, but these kinds of private enterprise league tables lacked the impact in Asia. With more heavy-handed state development models, government distinctions and projects resonated more with Asian decision-makers. With the launch of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2003, soon followed by *Times Higher Education–QS World University Rankings*, though, the landscape of higher education across the world was forever changed (Hazelkorn, 2015). No longer could universities in the region rely on domestic status symbols related to government connections. Indeed, with the rise of global league tables, Asian universities had a new barometer to measure against regional peers and even Western systems.

The rise of global university rankings in the early 2000s was in conjunction with a new global age for international education. This global era saw a dramatic increase in international student mobility, particularly fueled by Chinese students and other Asian neighbors filling classrooms around the world. Likewise, universities in this period created vast networks of

research partnerships and joint programs that globally connected scholars, students, and other stakeholders (Altbach, 2013). These global partnerships were exemplified by the rapid growth of transnational higher education in the 2000s. The environment created a race for resources: international students, institutional partners, and elite scholars. So-called world-class class universities could attract all of these resources, and institutions across the globe chased this status lockstep with rankings (Deem et al., 2008).

In addition, research indicates that there is a strong link between the socioeconomic development of a country and the rank positions of its universities (Li, M. et al., 2011). The World Bank has even promoted the usage of university rankings in its higher education development material (Salmi, 2009). Against this background, global university rankings are used not only as a convenient instrument to identify and monitor the gap between the standards of Asian universities and their Western counterparts, but also as an indicator of the different levels of socioeconomic development of countries (Marginson, 2017).

Given the complexity of these global interactions, university rankings became the currency for understanding the sector. Decision-makers could look at a single metric and determine where to recruit students from or which university was worthy of a joint-degree program. Positionality on a league table has turned into the capital that can be used in a competition amongst global peers to determine world-class status (Allen, 2021). In this context of global positional competition, policymakers and university administrators often use performance data generated by ranking agencies to frame decision-making and resource allocation. In this sense, ranking agencies acted as 'supra-national agencies', who established standards for monitoring, evaluating, comparing and regulating quality in higher education (Hazelkorn, 2018).

The ranking agencies understand this influence and they profit from it through consultancy services on how institutions can improve positioning. Despite this conflict of interest, university administrators have been willing to pay these consultants for services and plans that often directly benchmark regional or global peers against one another. Asian universities have been fueling the ranking agencies' consultancy wings with desires to catch up with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, higher education leaders and researchers expressed skepticism about the validity and relevance of global rankings. Thus, although the leading ranking schemes have been a commercial success, they needed to constantly struggle for trust and credibility in the higher education sector (Lim, 2018).

One major problem with the ranking game is that it is often seen as a zero-sum game (Marginson, 2014). If a competitor moves up, then another institution moves down. University ranking agencies produce a single metric in which every institution is ordinally ranked sequentially, though there is some variation (see Table 1 for criteria and indicators of the leading ranking systems). For instance, in the ARWU, only one university can be ranked at each position from 1 to 100, but the agency creates large bands from 101-150, 151-200, 201-300, and so on through 1000. Moreover, apart from their original global rankings, all the three leading ranking systems (i.e. ARWU, Quacquarelli Symonds [QS] World University Rankings and Times Higher Education [THE] World University Rankings) create regional and by-subject rankings, which allow the rankers to include more universities in their league tables. However, the function of ordinal rank increases competition, which is only exacerbated by the yearly nature of the release (Hazelkorn, 2015).

An institution may dramatically fall one year not due to underperformance, but merely because competitors have increased their indicator outputs. University presidents and even government officials have been fired due to these types of falls, such as the high profile

sacking of the University of Malaya's (UM) Vice-Chancellor due to a drop in the THE ranking that was not even related to changes at the institution, but rather to a tweak in the agency's metric (Salmi, 2009; Hazelkorn, 2015). Further, the threat of this happening sits with these stakeholders every year. There is no running from the rankings. The European Commission attempted to alleviate this jockeying nature of university rankings by introducing a band system league table called Multidimensional Global Ranking of Universities (U-Multirank) (Marginson, 2014). In this scheme, universities are not ranked ordinally, but rather put in large groups according to various indicators. However, the alternative ranking has had little impact globally, let alone in Asia.

Table 1: Leading Global University Systems with Indicator Weights

Criteria	ARWU	%	QS	%	THE	%
Reputational			Employer/ academic reputation surveys	50	Teaching/ research reputation surveys	33
Research and Bibliometric	Nobel Prizes/ Medals; Clarivate's Highly cited researchers; SSCI/ SCI/ *Nature*/ *Science* publications	90	Scopus publications/ citations	20	Scopus publications/ citations; Research income	42
Internationaliz ation			International faculty/ students	10	International faculty/ students; International collaborations	7.5
University Characteristics	Performance relative to size	10	Student-to-faculty ratio	20	Student-to-faculty ratio; Doctorate-to bachelor's ratio; Doctorates awarded-to-academic staff ratio; Institutional income in public-private partnership; Industry income	17.5

Source: Compiled from organizations' websites and categorized by the authors of this chapter.

Understanding the Ranking Game in the Asian Context
The literature often adopts neoliberalism as the theoretical approach to explain the prevalence of the ranking game within the context of the rapid growth of international higher education trade. From this neoliberal perspective, global university rankings are important, as they substantially influence student choice. In other words, the primary role of rankings is to serve as a consumer information tool providing market information, enhancing market transparency and upholding market accountability (Hazelkorn, 2008). Theoretically, rankings are seen as institutionalization of market principles in the governance of universities. It involves the incorporation of market values and practices into the regulation and organization of universities (Lynch, 2015).

However, the Asian experience provides a different understanding of the role of rankings in the global context. In Asia, university rankings are widely used as a policy instrument by governments and university leaders to measure and monitor the performance of universities in the context of contesting globalization. The performance data provided by university rankings is also used in making decisions and allocating resources (Hazelkorn,

2015). Stepping up specific criteria used in the major global ranking systems becomes an efficient way for universities to earn an internationally recognized status and validate their international stature, thereby gaining more resources. From the governments' perspective, this desire for building globally recognized universities is grounded on the belief that developing higher education is a crucial factor determining the national competitiveness in the age of knowledge economy (Altbach, 2013). This belief is revealed in the policy texts and supported by the connection between a country's socioeconomic development and the rank positions of its universities (see Li, F. et al., 2011; Li, M. et al., 2011 for the example of China).

The center-periphery model is commonly used in the literature to theoretically explain the eagerness of many Asian countries to climb up university rankings and thus reflect the enhancement of their national competitiveness. Specifically, in this post-colonial theoretical model, peripheral Asian countries are eager to learn from or even copy the perceived more advanced Western higher education model in order to catch up with the core Western countries. This catch-up mentality is further revealed by the quest for establishing world-class universities, which was triggered by the emergence of global university rankings and has become prevalent since the mid-2000s in the region. Consequently, Western research-intensive universities, particularly the prestigious ones, are popularly used by national top universities in Asia as benchmarks to guide their pursuit of world-class status (Shin and Harman, 2009). In short, the post-colonial approach frames the ranking game within the context of the rise of Asia, assuming a direct correlation between developing research universities and enhancing national competitiveness.

Both neoliberal and post-colonial approaches conceptualize the use of rankings in university governance as an application of managerialism, which imposes a performance-driven culture on universities. As a result, a trend of standardization, which emphasizes making outputs, performance and quality more calculable and comparable, has become prevalent in higher education. Thus, the prevalence of rankings and the associated rise of managerialism can be seen as a process of numerical objectification (Kauppi, 2018). Based on this understanding of the manifestation of managerialism in higher education, the origin of the ranking game refers to the emergence of the global competitive order, which is featured by global capitalism and its neoliberal agenda that identify higher education as a tradable commodity and the structure of the global political economy that can be articulated by the center-periphery explanatory model for higher education (Lo and Hou, 2020).

The strategies for climbing up league tables and building world-class universities have greatly changed the higher education ecosystem in Asia. Given that major ranking systems use the international dimensions of academic impacts and productivity, which mainly refer to publishing and being cited in the international English-language journals listed in the Science Citation Index (SCI) and the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), as key criteria to assess the performance of universities, a phenomenon of overemphasizing international scientific publications, which is also known as the SCI/SSCI craze, has become common in many Asian higher education systems. Meanwhile, the local dimensions of faculty work are devalued and even marginalized in this process of pursuing world-class excellence (Chou, 2014).

There is a substantial body of literature providing some critical reflections on this pursuit of world-class status (e.g. Allen, 2021; Yang, R., 2019). These reflections reveal and criticize that the world-class university movement simplifies the purpose of Asian universities in its process of copying the Western higher education model and promotes a cultural hegemony. Complying with this hegemony causes a trend of isomorphism, in which indigenous cultural traditions and characteristics of some higher education systems in Asia

have been undermined. Thus, this literature emphasizes that Asian societies need to re-establish the connection between universities and local communities, thereby regaining their cultural roots in defining the purposes of universities.

Furthermore, there was (re)stratification in some Asian higher education systems, where policies of differentiation and fund concentration were adopted to facilitate the development of few elite universities, given the limited government funds (Cheng et al., 2014; Hazelkorn, 2015). Specifically, some Asian governments launched special funding schemes aiming to assist selected universities in improving their research capacity and internationalization profile so as to reach world-class status. These targeted areas align with the criteria used in various ranking schemes. The following are some examples of these stratification, elite-making initiatives from the region.

Mainland China
Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Chinese government launched several higher education initiatives geared towards improving the nation's standing in the world in terms of higher education. Notably, Mainland China has been one of the most active players on the international higher education landscape in the last 20 years. This contextual factor justified Project 211 in 1995 and later Project 985 in 1998, which funneled substantial funding towards the elite end of the Chinese higher education sector (Song, 2018). The government-backed projects engrained a strict hierarchical status of the sector, with the 39 institutions included in Project 985 at the top, followed by those only included in Project 211. There was further stratification, as nine prestigious universities funded by Project 985 were selected by the government to form the C9 League, an alliance of elite universities, in 2009. The universities included in these government-backed projects have been especially keen on improving international prestige (Huang, 2015).

With strong incentives and funding backing from the government, Chinese institutions have collectively overtaken most of the world in terms of research output metrics and have rapidly risen in global university rankings (Allen, 2017). Chinese universities formerly created ambitious incentive structures to reward academic production, such as considerable cash rewards for publishing articles in journals listed in SCI and SSCI, both of which are used as an indicator in the ARWU scheme. However, in 2020, the government banned universities to incentivize their faculty members to publish in these journals (Huang, 2020). Given the rise, the elite Chinese universities now attract scholars, students, and businesses from around the world. In 2015, the government has reconceptualized its elite-making projects into the Double First Class Project, which is a more ambitious strategy compared to those from the 1990s (Peters and Besley, 2018).

South Korea
In South Korea, the call for developing world-class universities can be put within the context of continued economic growth and the associated rapid higher education expansion in the 1980s and 1990s. By the mid-1990s, South Korea accomplished massification of higher education and began a transformation from a manufacturing economy to a more knowledge-driven sector, putting an emphasis on the development of world-class research universities (Shin, 2012). Thus, in 1999, the government initiated the Brain Korea 21 (BK21) project with the explicit goals of improving the international standing of 10 universities and making the country among the world's top 10 in terms of knowledge transfer from academia to industry through a massive funding campaign. Overall, the elite universities in the sector saw boosts

in their international rank positions, but the funding from BK21 overwhelmingly focused on the hard sciences and technological research (Byun et al., 2013).

With the success of the BK21, the South Korean government launched more elite-making higher education efforts with the World Class University (WCU) project in 2008 and the BK21 PLUS project in 2013. The main goal for the WCU Project was to attract scholars from around the world to South Korean universities and an expansion of programing offerings, including humanities and social science. The funding allowed the top institutions to expand offerings of English language curriculum, important to attracting international students, and publications in highly-cited indices, which are mostly published in English. The BK21 PLUS refocused the initiative to foster graduate student (both Master's and doctoral level) research education and output, while moving several universities into the top-200 of global league tables. The efforts have paid off, as South Korea has consistently placed a handful of universities in this desired range on the most popular ranking schemes (Jang et al., 2016).

Japan

Compared to its neighboring countries like China and South Korea who have been heavily investing in their national top universities to pursue world-class status since the mid-1990s, Japan showed less interest in joining the contest during the period, as its higher education system and universities have been well and long established. However, it felt pressure and took reactive actions, which modeled the elite-making schemes in China and South Korea, in the early 2000s. The first wave of elite-making initiatives include the Twenty-First Century Centers of Excellence in 2002 and the Global Centers of Excellence in 2007. These government-backed projects aimed to selectively fund a few internationally competitive research units and nurture young researchers. Meanwhile, a 10-year project called the World Premier International Center Initiative was launched in 2007 to further increase the government investment in scientific research (Yonezawa and Shimmi, 2015).

The Japanese government later realized the importance of higher education internationalization to the country's international presence, and thus began the second wave of excellence schemes (including the Global 30 in 2009 and the Top Global University Project in 2014). These projects primarily aimed to fund selected universities to increase their degree of internationalization, rather than to invest in research units on their research performance. Nevertheless, the progress in internationalizing higher education remained slow. By launching the Designated National University Project in 2017, the government has further shifted the focus of its excellence initiatives to the socio-economic development of the nation. This latest project therefore requires its six funded universities to link their research and education with promoting social change and industrial innovation (Yonezawa, 2019).

Taiwan

Taiwan completed its higher education massification and began its elite-making policy in the late 1990s. In 1998, the government rolled out the Programme for Promoting Academic Excellence of Universities, aiming to increase the research capacity of the university sector. The launch of the Aim for the Top University Project in 2005 then clearly reflected Taiwan's ambition of building world-class universities. This 10-year project aimed to cultivate at least one university ranked among the world's top 100 within a decade, and develop several global elite research units in some subject areas in five years. Around the same time, the government launched another two projects called the Programme for Encouraging Teaching

Excellence in Universities and the Programme for Developing Exemplary Universities of Science and Technology to improve the teaching quality and applied studies of the funded universities. These competition-based funding schemes have re-stratified the Taiwanese higher education system, in which the 12 funded research intensive universities are considered elite, followed by the teaching- and applied studies-oriented institutions included in the special funding schemes (Lo, 2014).

However, the elite-making schemes are considered unsuccessful, as universities in Taiwan did not significantly rise in major ranking systems within the project period. Meanwhile, these schemes caused an intensification of inter-institutional competition. As a result, the Higher Education Sprout Project was launched in 2017. The project is divided into two parts. The first part includes most universities in Taiwan. Emphasizing universities' social responsibility and diverse development in the sector, this part of the project aims to improve universities' teaching quality and facilitate them to make contributions to their communities. The second part continues to fund universities to pursue world-class excellence. However, compared to the previous elite-making projects, the amount of funding and the number of funded universities have considerably decreased (Lo, 2019).

Malaysia

The world-class university discourse entered Malaysia's higher education policy in the mid-2000s. In 2007, the government launched the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020 (NHESP 2020) and its Action Plan 2007–2010 to set the goal of developing Malaysia into a regional education hub by 2020. The hub strategy came with a policy of building world-class universities, intending to enhance the reputation of Malaysia's higher education system. In Action Plan 2011–2015 of the NHESP 2020, the government indicated its ambition of making selected universities among the world's top 100 by 2015. To achieve the goal of building world-class universities, the government identified four institutions as research universities that were provided with extra funding for strengthening their research capacity in 2006. Shortly afterwards, the government initiated the Accelerated Program for Excellence (APEX), which aimed to help a university achieve the world-class status through a government-aided transformation. In 2008, the University of Science Malaysia (USM) was granted the APEX status (Sirat, 2013).

Despite strong government support, the APEX initiative was not successful in making USM significantly rise in global rankings. Meanwhile, the USM management criticized that climbing up league tables was a catch-up game that merely meant to copy the Western higher education model. Thus, they opposed to use position in rankings to evaluate their university. Instead, they advocated adopting the concepts of 'world's first' and 'humaniversity' as alternative benchmarks for success in higher education. The former refers to several discoveries and innovations by USM deemed to be the world's first; the latter stresses such values as inclusiveness and sustainability to humanize universities (Tan and Goh, 2014; Wan et al, 2015). USM's APEX status was renewed in 2014. Though becoming a world-class university remains a goal, climbing up rankings is not included in the plan.

Implication of the stratification initiatives

The significant rise of Asian universities in major ranking systems in recent years shows that the elite-making strategy has successfully boosted the research performance and international reputation of universities from the region. For example, 43 of the world's top 200 are Asian universities according to the QS ranking of 2020. The rise of Asian universities

is less obvious in the THE ranking (i.e. 24 of the world's top 200 in 2020). However, THE particularly highlights China's performance, noting that the country is ranked joint six in terms of the number of universities in the top 200. Remarkably, China is a newcomer to this group and did not even appear in the top 10 five years ago. Meanwhile, South Korea has risen from tenth to ninth (Bothwell, 2019). It is noteworthy that the top two universities of Japan and those of Singapore and Hong Kong appear in the world's top 100 in both rankings; the top university of Taiwan is ranked among the top 100 in QS and as the world's top 120 in THE; UM in Malaysia is placed within the top 100 in QS.

On the one hand, the rise of Asian universities has proven a positive association between rankings and resource concentration. On the other hand, the uneven resource allocation can cause negative consequences. Indeed, the academic literature presents strong criticism of the disparity and isomorphism issues brought about by the selection and concentration approach adopted in the elite-making schemes. Disparity within the higher education sector refers to a situation that 'rankings are propelling a growing gap between elite and mass higher education with greater institutional stratification and research concentration. (Higher education institutions) which do not meet the criteria or do not have brand recognition will effectively be de-valued' (Hazelkorn, 2007, p. 1). Evidently, while top universities in Japan and Taiwan enjoyed abundant resources to pursue the world-class status, their counterparts in the lower tiers of the system were insufficiently funded to internationalize themselves (Yonezawa and Shimmi, 2015; Lo, 2014). In Mainland China, the funding concentration may have widened the gap between the rich and poor regions, because most elite universities are located in the wealthy eastern coastal region (Gao, 2017).

While the highlighted elite-making policies in the region have led to some impressive results, research also indicates that emphasizing rankings may encourage universities to move resources from educational activities to ranking-oriented activities (e.g. research and publishing) (Kim, 2018). For example, there is a situation of over-attention to research at the expense of teaching, because faculty members, especially young ones who are hired on a contractual basis, are under enormous pressure to publish in international journals (Tian et al., 2016). This pressure to publish or perish leads to the SCI/SSCI syndrome (Chou, 2014), which reflects that emphasizing highly-cited scientific publications devalues the humanity and soft sciences research and the local/national dimensions of faculty work (e.g. doing applied studies and services and publishing in non-English, non-indexed journals) (Song, 2018; Allen, 2021). This also creates a highly competitive and performative academic culture, which can threaten collegiality in academia (Macfarlane, 2016).

Moreover, the emphasis on international publications also leads to a trend of isomorphism, in which cultural traditions and characteristics of Asian higher education are undermined (Deem et al, 2008). The negative consequences explain why Mainland China prohibited its universities to provide incentives for their faculty staff and students to publish in SCI journals, why Taiwan launched the policy that emphasized the social responsibility of universities and removed its mass higher education sector from the ranking game, and why Malaysia proposed the concepts of world's first and humaniversity as alternative paths. This recent pushback may signal a new, developing relationship between global rankings and the Asian region.

Antinomy of the Power of Global University Rankings
There are two sides of the ranking game forming an antinomy of the power of global university rankings (Marginson, 2009; Lo, 2014). One side sees the function of rankings as an

open source, which effectively indicates the path to world-class status. As Kauppi (2018) explains, rankings create 'a global unified playing field that includes the best in a quantified, descending interval order' and transform 'the implicit criteria of excellence and reputation used hitherto in academia into formal criteria that constitute a numerical global competitive space' (p. 1755). He further adds that the performance data provided by ranking exercises is seen as a highly objective form of information that provides players in the global field of higher education with access to a profound level of reality. Consequently, global higher education competition has been increasingly framed in numerical terms (Kauppi, 2018). Indeed, research indicates a close relationship between universities' performance in scientific publishing and their international rank positions (Kivinen et al., 2017). This explains why rankings are widely used as instrumentation for knowledge production and academic reputation, as they provide a global playing field for an open competition for scholarly prestige.

Recent studies suggest that global university rankings reveal and accelerate a long-term shift in academic centrality from Anglo-America to Asia. In particular, the last two decades witnessed the development of knowledge hubs and networks in Asia and an exponential rise of scientific productivity in Mainland China. The constant growth of these knowledge hubs and networks and that of China's research productivity illustrates the emergence of a multipolar and networked pattern, which has been gradually replacing the center-periphery pattern, in the world system of knowledge production (Jöns and Hoyler, 2013). As research capacity that can be expressed in the number of top research universities is closely related to national competitiveness (Altbach, 2013), rankings not only reflect and contribute to the reshaping of the global higher education landscape but also that of the global geopolitical landscape (Hazelkorn, 2018).

However, there are queries about the significance of this potential shift of the academic center. For example, Altbach (2016) calls the current dynamic in China a 'glass ceiling [with] feet of clay'. The 'feet of clay' portion of the critique exemplifies that the mid- to bottom-tier institutions have, in some sense, been left behind due to the fixation with ranking systems that favor the elite. The 'glass ceiling' portion of the argument suggests that China's elite universities cannot truly become world-class without the same kinds of academic freedoms found in Western systems, despite rises in the global rankings. The critique has obvious connections to other Asian societies, as the elite-making strategy is widely used in the region and other Asian systems may also face issues in government pressures on research agendas to some degree.

Another side of the ranking game highlights the hegemonic nature and the homogenizing effects of the global rankings. This side of the antimony adopts a post-colonial perspective, from which the Anglo-American paradigm has dominated the discourse on the process of globalization in higher education, thereby leading to the emergence of 'a new dependence culture' in academia (Deem et al., 2008). Based on this theoretical approach, global university rankings have become an institution upholding the current Anglo-American academic hegemony in the global field of higher education, as the ranking schemes and their criteria are heavily relied on academic and research resources (e.g. publishing outlets and bibliometric indices) based in the US and other Western countries (Marginson, 2009). In other words, the ranking game constitutes 'the consolidation of existing asymmetries and monopolies of global power and knowledge' and produces and legitimizes a unipolar global competitive order for higher education (Kauppi, 2018, p. 1751). Recent literature further argues that other criteria (i.e. the degree of internationalisation and the number of Nobel

laureates) used in leading ranking systems represent a manifestation of whiteness in the global academic field (Estera and Shahjahan, 2019; Stack, 2020). In short, this side of the ranking game produces an institutionalization of the global hegemony, which denotes a coercive appropriation of Western knowledge production. Such coercive power, which is an assertion of the catch-up mentality, is rooted in the historical legacy of European colonialism and contemporary Western supremacy associated with Pax Americana (Lo, 2011; Ordorika and Lloyd, 2014; Shahjahan et al., 2017).

However, some research suggests that the nature of the power of rankings is negotiable rather than hegemonic. For instance, Lim (2018) argues that the influence of rankings is built upon a kind of 'weak expertise' that identifies rankings as 'the result of a constantly negotiated balance between the relevance, reliability, and robustness of rankers' data and their relationships with their key readers and audiences' (p. 415). Such negotiable nature of rankings reveals that, to a large extent, the global rankings are commercial in nature, despite being used as policy and management tools on the occasion of global competition in higher education. In the context of India, Lim and Øerberg (2017) further note that rankers are willing to accommodate to Indian universities when developing and adjusting the methodologies of their assessments, due to commercial considerations. These findings substantially question the hegemonic nature of rankings.

Furthermore, policymakers and university leaders in peripheral Asian countries have begun to reflect on the emphasis on catching up with the core Western models of research universities. For example, as previously discussed, Mainland China has revised its policies in order to move away from SCI and SSCI measures, although these actions would likely lead to a fall in the rankings (Huang, 2020). Relatedly, in his article in THE, the vice-president of China's Tsinghua University notes that leading Chinese universities will adapt to a development model that is not aimed at catching up, but responds to the needs of their communities, the national development priorities and critical global issues. He believes that Chinese higher education will demonstrate its own cultural characteristics (Yang, B., 2019). Similar advocacy (i.e. emphasizing cultural roots and missions in higher education development) by university leaders is reported in recent research on other Asian societies (Yang, R., 2019). In sum, these latest developments drive us to rethink the hegemonic power of rankings (Lo and Liu, 2021).

Conclusion: A New Era for Asian Universities?

Given the criticism over the competition and oversimplification brought about by the global rankings, research explores the way of toning down the competitive elements and underlining the collaborative ones in ranking exercises. For example, Shin and Toutkoushian (2011) suggest that rankings should develop towards four directions: multidimensional, customer-centered, regional and discipline-based. These directions are based on a principle that 'the real value of "ranking" is not ranking, but matching' (van der Wende and Westerheijden, 2009, p. 78). Thus, as previously mentioned, U-Multirank was created in Europe, with a goal of overcoming the overemphasis on research and the convergence caused by the other rankings. Meanwhile, ranking agencies have proliferated the types of league table offerings to include more regional and specialized offerings. For instance, in 2009, QS launched a ranking specifically for the Asian region with altered weights and indicators. Likewise, ARWU also produces a Greater China league table that incorporates universities of Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Given the rise of a metric regime, international rankings have pushed regulators to develop domestic rankings (e.g. China's Chinese Disciplinary Ranking

and India's National Institutional Ranking Framework). However, the impact of these domestic, regional and specialized rankings has been unclear. On the one hand, the diverse ranking schemes allow universities to create narratives that manipulate their rank positions to promote their own strengths (Heffernan and Heffernan, 2018). On the other hand, when many Asian universities have already reached elite ranks in the more prominent schemes, the secondary regional rankings look less appealing.

The rise of Asian universities in rankings has also led to signs of increased confidence from the elite in the sector. For the past two decades, policies in Asia have been explicit in the goal of catching up to the West and these elite-making policies throughout the region have appeared to work. The top Asian universities and departments now appear in prime positions on the various global league tables and their Western peers have pursued numerous partnerships, providing key recognition from the old hegemonic group to the new risers. As these elite institutions have caught up in the numbers game, they have been trying to combine their traditions with Western knowledge, thereby pursuing research and teaching suited to the unique needs and priorities of their communities (Yang, R., 2019). The announcement that Chinese universities would no longer place emphasis on SCI publications demonstrates this shift of focus in the post catch-up era.

However, although elite universities in Asia have successfully caught up in rankings, strengthening the 'clay feet' segment of the systems that had been left behind remains a challenge for many Asian higher education systems. Moreover, both the eagerness to join and win in the ranking game and the argument of tensions caused by the shift in academic centrality reveal an orientation of higher education development that is habitually set out in an East-West dichotomy. This orientation rationalizes the focus of world-class status defined by inclusion and affirmation by Western contexts. Thus, a corollary for what may lay ahead for Asian systems in the post catch-up era is a reorientation that intimates an abandonment of the East-West dichotomous approach and a reconstruction of the worldview that involves a combination of competition and collaboration within and across regions (Lo, 2016). With such a paradigm shift, Asian universities will truly divert attention away from the catch-up game, but will see adherence to the needs of their respective societies.

References

Allen, R. M., 2017. 'A Comparison of China's 'Ivy League' to Other Peer Groupings through University Rankings'. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 21 (5): 395.

Allen, R. M., 2021. 'Commensuration of the Globalised Higher Education Sector: How University Rankings Act as A Credential for World-class Status in China'. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 51 (6): 920.

Altbach, P. G., 2013. 'Advancing the National and Global Knowledge Economy: The Role of Research Universities in Developing Countries'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (3): 316.

Altbach, P. G., 2016. 'Chinese Higher Education: Glass Ceiling" and "Feet of Clay"'. *International Higher Education*, 86 (Summer): 11.

Bothwell, E., 2019. "*THE World University Rankings 2020: China Powers Up.*" Retrieved 13 March 2020 from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/world-university-rankings-2020-china-powers.

Byun, K., J. E. Jon, and D. Kim, 2013. 'Quest for Building World-class Universities in South Korea: Outcomes and Consequences'. *Higher Education*, 65 (5): 645.

Cheng, Y., Q. Wang, and N. C. Liu, 2014. *How World-Class Universities Affect Global Higher Education*, Rotterdam: Springer Science & Business Media.

Chou, C. P., 2014. *The SSCI Syndrome in Higher Education: A Local or Global Phenomenon*, Rotterdam: Springer Science & Business Media.

Deem, R., K. H. Mok, and L. Lucas, 2008. Transforming Higher Education in Whose Image? Exploring the Concept of the 'World-class' University in Europe and Asia'. *Higher Education Policy*, 21 (3): 83.

Estera, A., and R. A. Shahjahan, 2019. 'Globalizing Whiteness? Visually Re/presenting Students in Global University Rankings Websites'. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 40 (6): 930.

Gao, C., 2017. "A Closer Look at China's World Class Universities Project." *The Diplomat*, Retrieved 13 March 2020 from https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/a-closer-look-at-chinas-world-class-universities-project.

Hazelkorn, E., 2007. 'How Do Rankings Impact on Higher Education?'. *IMHE Info*, 2017 (December): 1.

Hazelkorn, E., 2008. 'Learning to Live with League Tables and Ranking: The Experience of Institutional Leaders'. *Higher Education Policy*, 21 (2): 193.

Hazelkorn, E., 2015. *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education. The Battle for World-Class Excellence*, 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hazelkorn, E., 2018. 'Reshaping the World Order of Higher Education: The Role and Impact of Rankings on National and Global Systems'. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 2 (1): 4.

Heffernan, T. A., and A. Heffernan, 2018. 'Language Games: University Responses to Ranking Metrics'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 72 (1): 29.

Huang, F., 2020. 'China is Choosing its Own Path on Academic Evaluation'. *University World News,* Retrieved 13 March 2020 from https:// https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200225181649179.

Huang, F., 2015. 'Building the World-class Research Universities: A Case Study of China'. *Higher Education*, 70 (2): 203.

Jang, D. H., K. Ryu, P. Yi, and D. A. Craig, 2016. 'The Hurdles to Being World Class: Narrative Analysis of the World-class University Project in Korea'. *Higher Education Policy*, 29 (2): 234.

Jöns, H., and M. Hoyler, 2013. 'Global Geographies of Higher Education: The Perspective of World University Rankings'. *Geoforum*, 46: 45.

Kauppi, N., 2018. 'The Global Ranking Game: Narrowing Academic Excellence through Numerical Objectification'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43 (10): 1750.

Kim, J., 2018. 'The Functions and Dysfunctions of College Rankings: An Analysis of Institutional Expenditure'. *Research in Higher Education*, 59 (1): 4.

Kivinen, O., J. Hedman, and K. Artukka, 2017. 'Scientific Publishing and Global University Rankings. How Well are Top Publishing Universities Recognized?'. *Scientometrics*, 112 (1): 679.

Li, F., Y. Zhao, and W. J. Morgan, 2011. The Rate of Return to Educational Investment in China: A Comparative Commentary, *Education, Knowledge and Economy*, 5 (1–2): 45.

Li, M., S. Shankar, and K. K. Tang, 2011. 'Why Does the USA Dominate University League Tables?'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36 (8): 923.

Lim, M. A., 2018. 'The Building of Weak Expertise: The Work of Global University Rankers'. *Higher Education*, 75 (3): 415.

Lim, M. A., and J. W. Øerberg, 2017. 'Active Instruments: On the Use of University Rankings in Developing National Systems of Higher Education'. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 1 (1): 91.

Lo, W. Y. W., 2011. 'Soft Power, University Rankings and Knowledge Production: Distinctions between Hegemony and Self-determination in Higher Education'. *Comparative Education*, 47 (2): 209.

Lo, W. Y. W., 2014. *University Rankings: Implications for Higher Education in Taiwan*, Singapore: Springer.

Lo, W. Y. W., 2016. 'The Concept of Greater China in Higher Education: Adoptions, Dynamics and Implications'. *Comparative Education*, 52 (1): 26.

Lo, W. Y. W., 2019. 'Taiwan: From "World-Class" to Socially Responsible'. *International Higher Education*, 98 (Summer): 27.

Lo, W. Y. W., and A. Y.-C. Hou, 2020. 'A Farewell to Internationalisation? Striking a Balance between Global Ambition and Local Needs in Higher Education in Taiwan'. *Higher Education*, 80 (3): 497.

Lo, W. Y. W., and S. Y. Liu, 2021. 'Are University Rankings Still Important? Perspectives from Greater China'. In *Research Handbook on University Rankings: Theory, Methodology, Influence and Impact*, edited by in E. Hazelkorn and M. Georgiana, 278–293. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Lynch, K., 2015. 'Control by Numbers: New Managerialism and Ranking in Higher Education'. *Critical Studies in Education*, 56 (2): 190.

Macfarlane, B., 2016. 'Collegiality and Performativity in a Competitive Academic Culture', *Higher Education Review*, 48 (2): 31.

Marginson, S., 2006. 'Dynamics of National and Global Competition in Higher Education'. *Higher Education*, 52 (1): 1.

Marginson, S., 2009. 'Open Source Knowledge and University Rankings'. *Thesis Eleven*, 96 (1): 9.

Marginson, S., 2014. 'University Rankings and Social Science'. *European Journal of Education*, 49 (1): 45.

Marginson, S., 2017. 'The World-class Multiversity: Global Commonalities and National Characteristics'. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 12 (2): 233.

Ordorika, I., and M. Lloyd, 2014. 'International Rankings and the Contest for University Hegemony'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30 (3): 385.

Peters, M., and T. Besley. 2018. 'China's Double First-class University Strategy: 双一流'. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50 (12): 1075.

Salmi, J., 2009. *The Challenge of Establishing World-class Universities*, Washington, DC: World Bank.

Shahjahan R. A., and C. Morgan, 2016. 'Global Competition, Coloniality, and the Geopolitics of Knowledge in Higher Education'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37 (1): 92.

Shahjahan, R. A., G. B. Ramirez, and V. Andreotti, 2017. 'Attempting to Imagine the Unimaginable: A Decolonial Reading of Global University Rankings'. *Comparative Education Review*, 61 (1): 51.

Shin, J. C., and R. K. Toutkoushian, 2011. 'The Past, Present, and Future of University rankings'. In *University Rankings: Theoretical Basis, Methodology and Impacts on Global Higher Education*, edited by J. C. Shin, R. K. Toutkoushian, and U. Teichler, 1–16. Dordrecht: Springer Science and Business Media.

Shin, J. C., 2012. 'Higher Education Development in Korea: Western University Ideas, Confucian Tradition, and Economic Development'. *Higher Education* vol. 64: 59.

Shin, J. C., and G. Harman, 2009. 'New Challenges for Higher Education: Global and Asia-Pacific Perspectives'. *Asia Pacific Education Review* vol 10 (1): 1.

Sirat, M., 2013. 'Malaysia's World-Class University Ambition: An Assessment'. In *Institutionalization of World-Class University in Global Competition*, edited by J. C. Shin and B. M. Kehm, 205–223. Dordrecht: Springer Science and Business Media.

Song, J., 2018. 'Creating World-class Universities in China: Strategies and Impacts at a Renowned Research University'. *Higher Education* vol. 75 (4), 729.

Stack, M., 2020. 'Academic Stars and University Rankings in Higher Education: Impacts on Policy and Practice'. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* vol. 4 (1): 4.

Tan, Y. S., and S. K. Goh, 2014. 'International Students, Academic Publications and World University Rankings: the Impact of Globalisation and Responses of a Malaysian Public University'. *Higher Education*, 68 (4): 489.

Tian, M., Y. Su, and X. Ru., 2016. 'Perish or Publish in China: Pressures on Young Chinese Scholars to Publish in Internationally Indexed Journals'. *Publications* vol. 4 (2): 9.

van der Wende, M., and D. Westerheijden, 2009. 'Rankings and Classifications: The Need for a Multidimensional Approach. In *Mapping the Higher Education Landscape: Towards a European Classification of Higher Education*, edited by F. van Vught, 71–86. Dordrecht: Springer.

Wan, C. D., M. Sirat and D. A. Razak, 2015. 'The Idea of a University: Rethinking the Malaysian Context'. *Humanities*, 4 (3): 266.

Yang, B., 2019. 'THE World University Rankings 2020: Time to Follow Our Own Star', Retrieved 13 March 2020 from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/world-university-rankings-2020-time-follow-our-own-star.

Yang, R., 2019. 'Turning Scars into Stars: A Reconceptualized View of Modern University Development in Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Singapore'. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 14 (1): 1.

Yonezawa, A., 2019. 'A New National Role for Universities, But Little Funding', Retrieved 13 March 2020 from https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190121144548216.

Yonezawa, A., and Y. Shimmi, 2015. 'Transformation of University Governance through Internationalization: Challenges for Top Universities and Government Policies in Japan'. *Higher Education*, 70 (2): 173.