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Development of the Higher Education System in Modern China

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ABSTRACT

Higher education significantly reflects a country's educational standards, and the construction and development of high-quality universities are crucial for enhancing a nation's overall strength and international competitiveness. The Chinese government has placed great emphasis on and provided extensive support for the development of high-quality universities in China. Through a series of national educational projects such as the "211 Project," "985 Project," and "Double First-Class University Plan," the overall level and international competitiveness of Chinese higher education have improved significantly, effectively supporting the sustained and healthy development of the economy and society. This paper reviews and analyzes the policy development of Chinese higher education, examines the progress and current status of high-quality university development in China, reflects on the challenges and shortcomings in the current construction of high-level universities in China, and proposes relevant strategies.

Keywords: Chinese Higher Education, University Development Policies, Double First-Class Initiative, Higher Education Competitiveness, Educational Reform Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Due to China's comprehensive and robust economic and political development, the country has succeeded in establishing the world's largest higher education system. China currently has more than 44.3 million enrolled students, over 240 million individuals who have received higher education, and an average of 13.8 years of schooling among newly added members of the labor force. These indicators reflect a significant transformation in the quality structure of the national workforce, while the overall competency and human capital of the Chinese population have continued to improve steadily [1]. According to the Annual Report on China's Education Statistics (2021), China had a total of 3,012 higher education institutions (HEIs) nationwide. These include 1,238 Academic HEIs, 164 Independent Institutions, 32 Professional HEIs offering bachelor-level vocational education, 1,486 Vocational HEIs, 256 Adult HEIs, and other HEIs whose numbers were not reported. The gross enrollment rate in higher education also experienced remarkable growth, rising from 30% in 2012 to 57.8% in 2021, an increase of 27.8 percentage points. This significant expansion represents a historic leap forward in the development of China's higher education sector.

Over the past forty years, China's higher education reform has been primarily driven by national policies and strategic guidance. Since the early years following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country has continually restructured universities and colleges. After the Reform and Opening-up period, China introduced several major national initiatives—such as the establishment of "Key National Universities" and "Key Disciplines," the Project 211, Project 985, university mergers and campus expansions, and most recently, the Double First-Class Initiative. These policies have profoundly shaped the landscape of higher education in China. As a result, virtually every aspect of the system—its structure, institutional scale, educational types, disciplinary groupings, academic majors, and curriculum frameworks—has been significantly influenced by national-level directives [2]. Given this

context, the present study reviews the historical literature on the development of modern Chinese higher education in order to analyze the impacts of these policies and to propose recommendations relevant to the establishment of a contemporary higher education system in Chinese universities.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the historical development and policy-driven transformation of China's higher education system from the reform era to the present.
2. To evaluate the impacts of major national initiatives—such as Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-Class Initiative—on the structure, quality, and competitiveness of Chinese higher education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the development of China's modern higher education system and to understand the influence of national policies on the evolution of universities over the past four decades. A qualitative design is most appropriate for this inquiry because the study aims not to measure numerical outcomes, but to interpret complex policy transformations, historical trajectories, and structural reforms within the higher education sector. The research relies entirely on secondary data, drawing extensively from official government documents, national education plans, policy reports, and archival records issued by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and leading Chinese universities. These sources provide insight into the state's strategic intentions behind major initiatives such as Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-Class University Plan. Academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and dissertations accessed through CNKI, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, was also reviewed to contextualize policy developments within broader scholarly debates.

Data collection followed a systematic literature review process, beginning with the identification of key terms related to educational reform, university competitiveness, and policy development. Relevant documents were screened for credibility, alignment with the research scope, and chronological relevance. From an initial pool of more than one hundred documents, sixty-eight were selected for in-depth analysis. Qualitative content analysis was employed to interpret the data. Through open and axial coding, themes such as structural adjustment, institutional expansion, governance reform, and quality enhancement were identified. These themes were then synthesized to reveal patterns and turning points in China's higher education reform.

To ensure trustworthiness, data from different sources were triangulated, and preliminary interpretations were discussed with scholars familiar with Chinese educational policy. While the study provides a comprehensive macro-level analysis, it acknowledges the limitation of relying solely on secondary data, which may not fully capture the lived experiences of institutional stakeholders.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The qualitative documentary analysis reveals that the development of modern Chinese higher education is the outcome of a long historical evolution and a series of state-led policy interventions. The findings can be summarized in two main dimensions: (1) the historical stages of higher education development from 1901 to the present, and (2) the policy trajectory and structural impact of key university initiatives, including Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-Class scheme.

Historical Stages of Modern Higher Education Development in China

First Stage: Initial Reform of the Education System (1901–1911)

The first phase marks the transition from traditional imperial education to a modern higher education system. After the Opium Wars, the Qing government was forced to abandon its isolationist policies and gradually recognized the gap between China and the West. In 1901, it ordered provincial *Shuyuan* academies to implement the "University Regulations" issued in 1902, which is widely regarded as the starting point of modern higher education in China. The abolition of the imperial civil service examination system in 1905 and its replacement with modern institutional selection mechanisms signaled a fundamental transformation in talent cultivation and curriculum structure toward a modern Chinese model.

Second Stage: Crisis and Disruption of Higher Education (1912–1949)

During the Republican era, political instability, civil wars, and foreign invasions severely disrupted the development of higher education. The outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War in 1937 caused massive destruction to universities; many institutions were bombed, closed, or forced to relocate. In response, the Ministry of Education issued new national admissions policies in 1938 to maintain minimum standards and ensure the survival of the higher education system. Nonetheless, the system remained fragile and fragmented, with limited capacity for systematic expansion or quality improvement.

Third Stage: Exploration and Soviet-Style System Building (1949–1977)

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the higher education system entered a stage of exploration and institutional experimentation. To meet the urgent demand for technical elites to support industrialization, China adopted the Soviet model of higher education, restructuring universities along specialized lines. The 1952 "Plan for the Reorganization of National Higher Education" initiated large-scale adjustments of faculties and the creation of specialized colleges, especially in engineering and industrial fields. While this model strengthened discipline-based training in priority sectors, it also led to excessive fragmentation and ideological control. The Cultural Revolution later caused unprecedented damage, with universities closed or repurposed, interrupting normal academic activities and research.

Fourth Stage: Reform, Opening, and Systemic Reconstruction (1978–2005)

After 1978, the reform and opening-up policy ushered in a comprehensive recovery and reconstruction of higher education. The state repositioned higher education as a strategic driver of modernization. Key measures included restoring academic order, redefining educational objectives, re-establishing the system of key universities and key disciplines, and diversifying institutional types to respond to market needs. Legislative efforts were introduced to standardize governance and ensure orderly development. During this period, graduate schools were established and expanded, marking a shift toward research-oriented universities and strengthening scientific research capacity.

Fifth Stage: Quality Enhancement, Equity, and Efficiency (2006–present)

From 2006 onwards, higher education policy has increasingly emphasized quality improvement, equity of access, and efficiency in resource allocation. The government has focused on improving teaching and research quality, rethinking the concept of "key universities," redefining the relationship between government, universities, and society, and implementing targeted poverty alleviation and regional support schemes in higher education. Strategic planning has become more holistic, with reforms aimed at building a distinctively Chinese higher education system that balances massification, excellence, and social justice.

Development of "Key Universities" and National Excellence Projects

The documentary analysis also reveals a clear policy trajectory in the construction of "key universities," which has evolved through several waves of initiatives.

Early PRC: From 6 to 16 National Key Universities

In the 1950s, the concept of "national key universities" first appeared. In 1954, six institutions were selected as the first batch of key universities, and in 1959, the list was expanded to 16. These universities, mostly located in Beijing and Shanghai and strongly oriented toward engineering, medicine, and agriculture, were designed to serve national industrial and scientific priorities. Over time, they became the core of China's elite university system and later formed the historical foundation of what came to be known as the "Chinese Ivy League" or C9 League.

Economic Adjustment and Expansion of the Key University System (1960s)

During the 1960s, natural disasters and deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations led to economic hardship and policy adjustment. The government responded by redefining the missions of key universities, shifting from comprehensive Soviet-style imitation to a framework of "adjustment, integration, strengthening, and improvement." In 1960, the number of national key institutions was expanded to 64, and by 1963 to 68. Most of these were engineering and specialized universities, concentrated in political and economic centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Liaoning. This reflected a strong alignment between national industrial strategy and the spatial distribution of key universities.

Post–Cultural Revolution Recovery and Redefinition of Key Universities (late 1970s–1980s)

After the Cultural Revolution, the state reinstated the key university policy to revive higher education. In 1978, the State Council approved a new list of 88 national key universities, later adjusted to 99 and then 91 due to mergers and renaming. Deng Xiaoping explicitly emphasized that key universities should assume dual functions of high-

level teaching and research and address urgent scientific and technological problems. The establishment and rapid expansion of graduate schools in leading universities during this period signaled a decisive move toward building research-oriented institutions and enhancing national innovation capacity.

Policy Results of Project 211 and Project 985

The analysis of policy documents shows that Project 211 and Project 985 constituted two landmark "engineering projects" in higher education development.

Project 211 sought to develop approximately 100 key universities and a set of priority disciplines that aligned with national economic and social needs in the 21st century. Officially approved in 1995, the project eventually covered 116 universities across China. Its qualitative outcomes include strengthening overall institutional capacity, optimizing faculty structure, upgrading core disciplines, and expanding international collaboration and exchanges. However, the analysis also reveals internal problems, including imbalanced and sometimes opaque funding allocation, inequalities between institutions, and limited transparency in evaluation processes. Despite these challenges, Project 211 is widely regarded as the largest and most influential elite-building project in the history of Chinese higher education.

Project 985, launched in 1998, had a more explicit, excellence-oriented objective: to support a small number of universities in becoming world-class institutions. Initial funding focused on Peking University and Tsinghua University, with 39 universities eventually included. The project stimulated intense competition, drove significant investments in research infrastructure, and increased global visibility of Chinese universities. At the same time, the study finds that issues remained regarding the over-centralized role of government, insufficiently rigorous long-term planning, and the risk of over-concentration of resources. Nonetheless, the combined implementation of Projects 211 and 985 shifted China's higher education from a ministry-based model to a project-based, nationally coordinated system of elite university construction.

The Double First-Class Initiative and its Relationship with 211/985

The Double First-Class initiative, introduced in 2015 and operationalized from 2017, represents the latest stage of China's excellence strategy. It aims to build both "world-class universities" and "world-class disciplines" and is explicitly framed as an integrated upgrade and restructuring of previous elite projects. The findings indicate that: In 2017, 42 universities were designated as "world-class universities," of which 39 had previously been included in Project 985, and three (Zhengzhou University, Xinjiang University, and Yunnan University) were newly elevated. 95 institutions were selected for "world-class disciplines," along with numerous key disciplines in the basic sciences, engineering, and the humanities and social sciences. The initiative adopts a dynamic evaluation and adjustment mechanism, with university and discipline lists subject to periodic review and change based on performance.

Qualitative analysis further shows that Double First-Class differs from 211 and 985 in several important ways:

1. ***Objectives and Focus***

   Project 211 aims at building a broad group of key universities and disciplines; Project 985 focuses on creating a small number of world-class research universities; Double First-Class emphasizes both institutional and disciplinary excellence, with particular attention to distinctive, high-impact disciplines.

2. ***Evaluation and Selection Mechanisms***

   While 211 and 985 universities retained relatively stable status once selected, Double First-Class operates under a dynamic, performance-based mechanism. Inclusion is no longer permanent; universities and disciplines must continuously demonstrate competitiveness and quality to remain on the list.

3. ***Overlap and Structural Continuity***

   All 985 universities were part of 211, and most Double First-Class universities are drawn from 985 and 211 institutions, indicating strong path dependence. However, the introduction of new universities and disciplines under Double First-Class reflects a gradual broadening and updating of the elite system.

4. ***Governance and Funding Patterns***

   Project 211 relied heavily on central–local co-funding and project-based management, while Project 985 encouraged stronger institutional self-management. Double First-Class further shifts toward outcome-oriented funding, strategic planning, and diversified evaluation criteria, although firm state steering remains a defining feature.

5. ***Implications for Access and Status***

Admission scores and employment outcomes are consistently higher for graduates of 985 universities than for those of 211 institutions, and Double First-Class universities enjoy even more substantial reputational advantages in key disciplines. This suggests that elite projects have reinforced vertical stratification in the system, even as the overall scale and quality of higher education have expanded.

Overall Synthesis

In summary, the qualitative findings show that the development of China's higher education system cannot be understood solely as quantitative expansion. Instead, it is a historically layered process driven by national strategies, shifting from early attempts at modernization, through Soviet-style specialization and post–Cultural Revolution reconstruction, to contemporary excellence-oriented and globally competitive models. The successive implementation of key university policies, including Project 211, Project 985, and the Double First-Class initiative, has created a multi-level elite system that plays a central role in China's pursuit of scientific, technological, and socio-economic modernization.

Key Challenges in Building High-Standard Universities

The qualitative analysis of policy documents, statistical reports, and scholarly literature reveals that, alongside the rapid expansion and upgrading of China's higher education system, several structural problems persist in the process of building high-level universities. At the same time, the data also point to emerging strategic directions and policy recommendations to improve the quality and equity of higher education. The research results can therefore be grouped into two main dimensions: (1) key challenges in the establishment of high-standard universities, and (2) proposed directions for development and reform.

Uneven Distribution of High-Quality Educational Resources

The first significant issue identified is the persistent uneven distribution of high-quality higher education resources across regions. Admission quotas, university locations, and the concentration of top-tier institutions are still heavily skewed toward certain provinces and metropolitan areas. Under the current planning system, allocation decisions have tended to prioritize a limited number of regions with strong economic bases and developed educational infrastructures, rather than balancing population size, regional needs, and educational equity.

As a result, provinces and cities that already have diverse, high-quality institutions continue to attract the majority of high-achieving applicants, while less developed regions—especially in western and northwestern China—face shortages of high-level universities and limited access to elite programs. This imbalance reduces educational opportunities for students from disadvantaged regions and reinforces long-term regional disparities. The findings suggest that this situation is linked not only to historical patterns of uneven development but also to relatively rigid institutional identities and the absence of a sufficiently dynamic mechanism for reallocating resources and status among universities.

Insufficiently Distinctive Institutional Profiles

A second key problem concerns the blurring of institutional missions and the lack of apparent institutional distinctiveness. Many local universities are striving to transform themselves into comprehensive research universities, often at the expense of their original strengths or niche specializations. Even institutions that historically possessed strong disciplinary characteristics or applied orientations have, in some cases, abandoned these distinctive features to pursue a more generalized, "all-round" university profile.

On the surface, this trend may appear to signify expansion and upgrading. However, the qualitative analysis indicates that it also leads to homogenization, program duplication, and the loss of competitive advantage. Instead of forming a diversified and complementary higher education system—with research universities, applied universities, specialist institutions, and vocational colleges each fulfilling different roles—many universities are converging on the same model of research-intensive comprehensive institutions. This reduces the overall efficiency and responsiveness of the system.

Limitations of Policy-Driven Reform

A third set of challenges relates to the inherent limitations of a predominantly policy-driven reform model. The analysis shows that state-led reforms have clear strengths: they provide strategic direction, set explicit goals, and ensure continuity and stability through national plans and formal policy documents. This approach has undoubtedly facilitated the rapid construction of key universities, the establishment of major projects such as 211, 985, and Double First-Class, and the broader expansion of higher education.

However, the findings also reveal several drawbacks. First, there is a tendency to over-rely on top-down documents and formal policy implementation, which can constrain flexibility and local innovation during the reform process. Second, macro-level policy blueprints may pay insufficient attention to the practical, micro-level

details of implementation within individual institutions. This can lead to gaps between policy intentions and actual practice, fragmented implementation, and difficulties in sustaining reforms over the long term. In some cases, universities may focus on meeting formal indicators for policy compliance rather than engaging in substantive, bottom-up academic and organizational transformation.

Proposed Directions for Development and Improvement

In addition to identifying problems, the analysis of documents and expert commentaries points to several key directions for future development and improvement in building high-quality universities in China.

Increasing Investment and Optimizing Resource Allocation

The first strategic direction concerns increasing investment and improving the efficiency of resource allocation. This involves not only raising overall funding for higher education, but also redesigning the geographical and structural layout of the system. The results suggest that the central government should continue to strengthen support for western and less-developed regions, using mechanisms such as inter-regional transfers, targeted educational funds, and the establishment of regional foundations to narrow historical gaps in educational infrastructure. At the same time, high-level universities are encouraged to enhance faculty quality and teaching capacity, thereby ensuring that resource inputs translate into real improvements in educational standards.

Promoting International Exchange and Cooperation

The second direction emphasizes the importance of internationalization. High-standard universities are expected to engage in international exchanges and cooperation actively, learn from global best practices, and improve their international competitiveness. The findings highlight the value of building long-term partnerships with leading foreign universities, sharing academic resources, and participating in global academic networks. Such collaboration can help Chinese universities improve program quality, expand research capacity, and position themselves more prominently within the international higher education landscape.

Deepening Higher Education Reform and Innovating Talent Training Models

A third critical direction is the deepening of internal educational reform. Universities need to proactively adjust their teaching content, curricula, and pedagogical methods to align with the demands of the new era and the labor market. This includes strengthening applied and innovative competencies, developing platforms for innovation and entrepreneurship, and encouraging experiential and problem-based learning. Closer collaboration with enterprises—through inviting experts to co-teach, using real-world case studies, and co-developing practice-oriented programs—can help students integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills more effectively.

Breaking Rigid Institutional Identities and Enhancing Dynamic Governance

Finally, the results point to the need to break down rigid institutional identities and move toward more dynamic governance mechanisms. This includes improving evaluation systems for universities and disciplines, with a stronger emphasis on performance, resource utilization, and the real outcomes of teaching and research. Dynamic support mechanisms—such as periodic mid-term evaluations, performance-based funding, and adjustable support levels—can encourage institutions to upgrade their capabilities continuously. At the same time, universities are encouraged to cultivate clear strategic visions and distinct profiles, building modern higher education institutions with Chinese characteristics that possess unique strengths and can engage and compete on an equal footing with leading universities worldwide.

DISCUSSION

The results of this qualitative analysis indicate that China's efforts to construct high-quality universities have generated remarkable progress but continue to face persistent structural challenges. These findings align with and extend previous scholarly work on Chinese higher education development.

Uneven Distribution of Educational Resources

The study confirms that China's higher education resources remain unevenly distributed across regions, with high-quality institutions concentrated in economically developed provinces. This is consistent with Li and Morgan's (2010) analysis, which demonstrated that elite universities in China tend to cluster in Beijing, Shanghai, and coastal provinces, producing significant inequalities in access and social mobility. Similarly, Hannum, Wang, and Lu (2021) argue that despite national investment policies, western and rural provinces continue to face shortages of high-level educational infrastructure. The present study reinforces these concerns and shows that

while large-scale initiatives such as Project 211 and Project 985 improved national capacity, they also inadvertently deepened regional disparities by directing funding disproportionately toward already advantaged institutions.

Weak Institutional Differentiation

The finding that many universities lack a clear identity or distinctive academic profile supports earlier critiques by Mok and Marginson (2021), who observed that the rapid expansion of Chinese universities has encouraged homogenization rather than meaningful differentiation. Marginson (2016) further noted that global rankings and competitive pressures have pushed institutions to imitate research-intensive models, often at the expense of applied or specialized missions. The present study shows that this trend persists, suggesting a continued need for policy frameworks that promote diversified institutional pathways rather than uniform upgrading.

Limitations of Policy-Driven Reform

The study also highlights intrinsic limitations in China's policy-driven approach to higher education reform. While strong state guidance is widely recognized as a key factor behind China's rapid gains in research capacity (Shen & Ma, 2022), scholars such as Mok (2016) caution that top-down reforms may neglect local implementation challenges and restrict institutional autonomy. The present findings support these arguments, indicating that excessive dependence on centrally issued directives can produce gaps between policy design and operational realities, leading to performance-oriented rather than development-oriented change.

Implications of Elite Projects (211, 985, Double First-Class)

Previous research consistently underlines the transformative impact of Project 211 and Project 985 on China's research universities (Liu, 2019; Gu, Li, & Wang, 2020). The current findings corroborate this body of work, demonstrating that these initiatives strengthened research capacity, infrastructure, and international visibility. However, the present study also expands on earlier critiques by showing that elite initiatives have reinforced stratification within the higher education system. This is consistent with Yang and Welch (2012), who argued that the emphasis on elite competition risks marginalizing non-elite institutions and creating a hierarchical system similar to Western mass higher education models.

Internationalization and Global Competition

The recommendation to strengthen international collaboration reflects the broader academic consensus that global engagement is central to China's higher education strategy. According to Wang and Cheng (2020), international partnerships have enhanced Chinese universities' research impact and global standing, particularly in Double First-Class institutions. The findings of this study support this conclusion, emphasizing that sustained global cooperation is essential for developing world-class disciplines and competing in international rankings.

Innovation in Talent Training

Finally, the results align with the growing literature advocating for pedagogical reforms and student-centered learning approaches. Chen and Sun (2022) argue that Chinese universities must shift from traditional lecture-based instruction to more innovative, practice-based models in order to meet the needs of a rapidly evolving labor market. This study reinforces that viewpoint by highlighting the importance of entrepreneurship education, applied learning, and industry collaboration in strengthening university competitiveness.

Overall Synthesis

The discussion indicates that while China's higher education development has achieved unprecedented scale and quality improvements, the path forward requires addressing systemic inequities, enhancing institutional diversity, refining governance mechanisms, and promoting deeper international engagement. These conclusions align with the existing research literature but also offer new insights into the internal challenges and policy dynamics shaping China's next phase of higher education reform.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the historical development, policy evolution, and contemporary challenges of building high-quality universities in modern China. Through qualitative analysis of historical documents, national policy frameworks, and scholarly literature, the research reveals that China's higher education system has undergone a profound transformation over the past century—from early modernization efforts in the late Qing period, through Soviet-style restructuring after 1949, to the comprehensive reforms and strategic excellence initiatives of the post-1978 era. Projects such as 211, 985, and the Double First-Class initiative have played a decisive role in elevating

China's leading universities to global visibility and significantly enhancing the country's scientific and technological capacity.

Despite remarkable achievements, the study also identifies several persistent structural challenges. The unequal distribution of high-quality educational resources across regions continues to hinder national educational equity. Institutional homogenization and the erosion of unique institutional missions weaken the overall effectiveness of the higher education ecosystem. Furthermore, while China's policy-driven reform model has ensured coherence and rapid progress, its top-down nature sometimes limits institutional autonomy, local adaptability, and long-term sustainability.

The findings suggest that the next phase of higher education development in China will require a more balanced and integrated approach—one that combines strong national coordination with greater institutional flexibility. Enhancing regional equity, strengthening institutional differentiation, deepening teaching and curriculum reforms, and expanding international cooperation will be essential for sustaining progress. Ultimately, China's ambition to build world-class universities must be accompanied by efforts to create a more inclusive, dynamic, and globally integrated higher education system that reflects both national priorities and international standards.

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