A Study on the Amalgamation of Chinese Higher Educational Institutions

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After nearly 15 years of painstaking efforts, the reform targets of higher education system have been met, and a decentralized, two-tiered administrative system has been installed. As reform proceeded, the 1990s witnessed revolutionary changes in China’s higher education system, particularly through radical mergers. The reform process and its background are detailed here, with a case study focusing on Zhejiang University. However, the most hotly debated reform has been the amalgamation of universities. Two kinds of merger can be identified and the whole process can be traced in detail. The need to optimize China’s system of higher education has a background dating back about 50 years, when the first reordering of higher education took place. The reordering and its results are described, and the causes and after effects of this reform are detailed.

Never before has Chinese higher education undergone such momentous changes, and never before has higher education attracted so much attention from either the general public or authorities at all levels. A new awakening has been brought about in higher education and as a result a new leap forward is taking place. As the vice-premier of the Chinese government announced on August 24, 2000 at a meeting of Congress, China’s optimization of the administration structure of higher education has been basically and successfully fulfilled (Li, 2000).

The main target of reform was to change the obsolete system under which universities were owned and run by a variety of central industry ministries, so as to establish a fairly decentralized, two-tiered management system. In this system administrative powers would be shared by both central and local governments, but with the local governments being required to play a major role. After nearly 15 year of painstaking effort, this two-tiered administrative system has been finally installed.

During the whole process of reformation, the guidelines were joint administration (gongjian), adjustment (tiaozheng), cooperation (hezuo) and merger (hebing). Joint administration between the central government and local levels illustrates the potential of provincial governments in the construction of universities. Adjustment calls for a shift in the balance of administrative power from the central government to local levels. Cooperation requires universities in the same area to cooperate by fully making use of resources owned by different institutions. At present, 452 institutions have changed the basis under which they are owned and run, and only a few more than 100 universities still remain directly under the administration of the central government. 71 flagship universities are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (MOE), and another 50 or so professional institutions (e.g. defense, sports, civil aviation, etc.) are temporarily under those corresponding ministries. Merger refers to the attempt to merge several universities and colleges into a new one. The decision making and implementation process for the amalgamation of universities and colleges were and remain one of the most difficult undertaking for

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Chinese higher educational reform in recent years. Nevertheless, a total of 612 higher institutions have been merged into 250 (Li, 2000) - although these moves have sometimes been perfunctory and unpleasant.

The Process

The process of reforming the administrative system of higher education can be divided into three stages.

1. *The brewing stage* (1985 to 1992). In 1985 the central authority declared the first act to restructure higher education. New ideas were widely publicized, reform was encouraged, and although, sporadic pilot experiments were indeed conducted, no substantial progress was made. Still the necessary foundation for further change had been laid.

2. *The exploration stage* (1992 to 1997). By 1992, the State Commission of Education (now MOE) actively sought a solution to the problem of segmentation between horizontal (dubbed bars) and vertical (dubbed blocks) departments, and by tentatively moving some institutions from the control of central ministries to provincial governments. In 1992, Guangdong province pioneered the pilot reform by co-constructing Zhongshan University and the Huanan (South China) University of Science and Technology under an agreement with the State Commission of Education. The administration of the Guangzhou University of Foreign Languages was also moved from the State Commission of Education to Guangdong province. Meanwhile mergers between universities were used as a mechanism to change the structure of higher education. The Tianjing College of Foreign Trade, owned by the Ministry of Foreign Trade, was transferred and at the same time amalgamated into Nankai University. During this period, some large-scale universities were established through amalgamation. In May of 1992, seven colleges in the city of Yangzhou in Jiangsu Province - Jiangsu Agriculture College, Yangzhou Teacher's College, Yangzhou Technical College, Yangzhou Medical College, Jiangsu Business College, and Jiangsu College of Water Conservation, were merged into a single new one under the new name of *Yangzhou University*. Yangzhou University thereafter covered a wide range of disciplines, and as a result, became then the most comprehensive and perhaps the largest university established since the 1950s. However the most tortured merger was between Sichuan University and the Chengdu University of Science and Technology in April 1994. This was the very first case of amalgamation between "strong" universities. In the reordering of the 1950s these two universities split from the then original Sichuan University. In fact only one road cuts the campus into two. However after decades of development, they were almost equally strong, though both suffered the deficits of provincialism and restrictions brought about by the arrangement of narrowly set disciplines. Both were later voluntarily incorporated together into one with formal support from the State Commission of Education. In addition, other comprehensive and large-scale universities were also created by combining several institutions. These include Nanchang University in Jiangxi province, Yanbian University in Jilin province, Shanghai University and Qingdao University in Shandong province. By 1998, 207 institutions had been merged into 84 (Bao, 1998).

3. *The full-scale advancement stage* (1998 to 2000). In 1988, an important meeting was held in Yangzhou, Jiangsu province to speed up the reform of the higher education administrative system. At the same time, the fourth campaign of governmental restructuring was officially unveiled in central government organs. Its goal was to change the role of government in the market economy emphasizing more macro-regulation rather than unnecessarily detailed micro-direction. As a result, the number of departments of the State Council was reduced from 40 to 29 (Guo, 2000), and their governmental staff levels were reduced by half. Professional ministries were no longer permitted to hold and run higher education institutions. Instead, universities and colleges were required to detach from their originally affiliated departments and find their own means of survival: some were to be decentralized to the localities, others were to be transferred to the Ministry of Education mainly by merging themselves with those universities that were already under the direct administration of the Ministry of Education. In this stage, 1232 institutions were radically changed through decentralization and amalgamation. About 406 universities have been restructured into 171 since 1996 (Ji, 2000). Consequently the amalgamation of universities and colleges was accelerated. Before 2000, the major focus was on the readjustment of administrative powers of those universities, which were separated from their former masters. However from the start of 2000, an all-around advancement was pushed