

China's Double First-Class Initiative and the Counter-Hegemonic Internationalization of Higher Education: A Small Study of Its Internationalization Policies

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how China uses its Double First-Class Initiative (Shuangyilu) to construct an alternative paradigm for higher education internationalization, navigating the tension between counter-hegemonic regional leadership and compliance with established global metrics. Moving beyond macro-level state rhetoric, this study interrogates the structural realities of this initiative by analyzing Ministry of Education (MoE) directives alongside dual institutional case studies of Tsinghua University and Xi'an Jiaotong University. Drawing on the critical frameworks of higher education scholars Rui Yang, Ka Ho Mok, and Simon Marginson, the research explores a central institutional contradiction: the state's explicit mandate to dismantle "SCI supremacy" versus the persistent reliance on commercial Western ranking systems like QS and THE for global legitimacy. Furthermore, the paper evaluates the operational reality of China's academic pivot toward the Global South via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), utilizing institutional curriculum tracking and qualitative partner feedback to test claims of an "alternative pathway." Finally, this paper addresses the systemic risks of an emergent Sino-centric academic hegemony and outlines the implications for Global South nations seeking genuine epistemic and policy autonomy within a multipolar knowledge economy.

Keywords: Double First-Class Initiative, Higher Education Policy, Counter-Hegemony, Global South, Institutional Case Studies, Academic Rankings.

INTRODUCTION

The architecture of global higher education has long been structured by a rigid core-periphery dynamic. For decades, Anglo-American universities have occupied the core, exercising an intellectual, linguistic, and institutional hegemony that dictates global criteria for academic prestige. Non-Western educational systems, particularly across the Global South, have historically operated on the periphery, navigating a condition of structural dependency where internationalization meant adopting Eurocentric metrics and Western organizational models at the cost of local socio-economic relevance. However, the rapid ascension of the People's Republic of China is challenging this established academic hierarchy. As Simon Marginson observes, the emergence of the post-Confucian model demonstrates that massive, state-directed funding can generate world-class scientific outcomes outside the Western liberal tradition, disrupting the singular dominance of the Anglo-American paradigm. At the vanguard of this structural shift is the Double First-Class Initiative (Shuangyilu), launched by the State Council in 2015. While initial interpretations framed the Shuangyilu as a standard "catching-up" mechanism, contemporary directives reveal a more complex, counter-hegemonic ambition: an effort to transition from a passive consumer of Western benchmarks into an active architect of an alternative academic universe. This paper provides a critical, multi-level analysis of this policy shift. By combining macro policy mapping with micro-level institutional case studies, it evaluates how China's elite university projects seek to balance international competitive integration with localized ideological autonomy, altering academic mobility across the Global South.

The Evolution of Chinese Higher Education Policy

To chart the counter-hegemonic trajectories of current regulations, it is necessary to contextualize the evolution of Chinese higher education policy over the past four decades. Following the opening-up reforms of the late twentieth century, China's internationalization strategies were primarily defensive and imitative. Signature programs such as Project 211 (1995) and Project 985 (1998) were explicitly designed to help an elite tier of domestic universities achieve global visibility by adopting Western academic standards. Success in this era was measured by compliance with external standards, specifically publication counts in Western indexing systems such as the Science Citation Index (SCI) and the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). The introduction of the Double First-Class Initiative in 2015 fundamentally altered this dynamic by replacing fixed institutional funding with flexible, discipline-specific resource allocation. More importantly, it marked an explicit ideological shift away from blind emulation. State directives increasingly mandated that internationalization must serve national strategic priorities and reflect "Chinese characteristics" (Zhongguo tese). As Rui Yang highlights, this transformation represents an ongoing attempt to synthesize "Chinese substance" (Ti) with "Western utility" (Yong), seeking to construct an indigenous epistemological framework that resists total integration into Western cultural and political norms.

Empirical Evidence: Institutional Implementation in Two Case Studies

To understand how these top-down state mandates translate into practice, we examine the institutional trajectories of two flagship universities that represent distinct strategic dimensions of the Shuangyilu framework.

Strategic Dimension	Case Study 1: Tsinghua University	Case Study 2: Xi'an Jiaotong Univ.
Primary Policy Mandate	Global Competitiveness & Status	Regional Connectivity & BRI Mobility
Curricular & Metric Shift	Localized STEM & "Chinese Context"	UASR Joint Degrees & Applied Sci.
Structural Role	Global Benchmark Comparison	Global South Geopolitical Hub

1. Tsinghua University: Redefining Metrics within the Global Core

As one of China's premier institutions, Tsinghua University illustrates the internal friction between global standard compliance and domestic alignment. Following the 2020 joint directive by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST)—“Opinions on Standardizing the Use of SCI Paper Indexes in Higher Education Institutions”—Tsinghua underwent an internal overhaul of its faculty evaluation and graduation requirements. The university dismantled the absolute requirement that doctoral students must publish a fixed number of SCI-indexed papers to graduate, replacing it with an institutional review panel evaluating the "innovative value" and practical contribution of the dissertation. Concurrently, Tsinghua's curriculum shifted to institutionalize localized knowledge production. In its engineering and public policy programs, case studies focused on domestic industrial breakthroughs (such as high-speed rail development and domestic semiconductor infrastructure) replaced standard Western textbooks. However, institutional tracking reveals that while internal promotion criteria now include domestic journals via the Excellence Action Plan for Chinese STEM Journals, faculty members remain under intense institutional pressure to maintain high-impact publications in international journals to sustain the university's standing in global ranking systems.

2. Xi'an Jiaotong University: Building the Regional Gateway

While Tsinghua manages the global core, Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJTU) serves as the primary operational hub for regional reorientation toward the Global South. XJTU forms the vanguard of the state's mandate to link the Double First-Class Initiative with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In response to MoE directives encouraging regional academic alliances, XJTU established the University Alliance of the Silk Road (UASR), which connects over 150 universities across Central Asia, Europe, and Africa. At the institutional level, XJTU restructured its curricular architecture to accommodate this regional pivot. The university launched specialized, English- and Russian-taught graduate programs in infrastructure engineering, cross-border e-commerce, and

renewable energy, specifically tailored to the development needs of Central Asian nations. Funding shifts within XJTU demonstrate a clear prioritization of these regional networks, with substantial capital allocated to joint international laboratories shared with partner institutions in Kazakhstan and Pakistan, establishing a distinct, parallel infrastructure for collaborative research.

Testing the "Alternative Pathway" Rhetoric: Partner Perspectives

A critical component of evaluating China's counter-hegemonic claims involves testing the state's "alternative pathway" rhetoric against qualitative data gathered from academic partners and international students operating within these frameworks. Institutional surveys and interviews conducted with faculty and administrators from Central Asian and African universities participating in the UASR reveal a nuanced, highly complex reality. On one hand, administrators from partner universities in Central Asia express high levels of satisfaction regarding Behavioral resource access. They note that the Silk Road Scholarship program provides fully funded opportunities for their top-tier students without the visa restrictions and cultural barriers increasingly encountered in Western nations. Faculty members highlight that Chinese institutions offer collaborative research funding focused on applied, localized regional challenges—such as water resource management in arid zones or regional logistics networks—which are often ignored by Western funding agencies.

On the other hand, qualitative interviews uncover underlying friction regarding structural dependency. Faculty members from African partner institutions point out that while the research funding is substantial, the academic agenda remains heavily directed by the Chinese host universities. The intellectual framework is frequently predefined around Chinese technical standards and technological platforms, raising concerns that the "alternative pathway" acts less as a horizontal partnership and more as a mechanism for incorporating developing universities into an expanding Sinocentric technical and educational ecosystem.

The Central Contradiction: Domestic Metrics vs. The QS/THE Duopoly

The foundational paradox of the contemporary Chinese higher education model lies in its simultaneous rejection and pursuit of global academic capital. This tension became acute following the MoE's 2020 Po Wu Wei ("Break the Five Manias") campaign, which legally prohibited universities from using SCI publication counts, patent counts, or global ranking positions as the sole criteria for funding, hiring, or institutional evaluation. This policy created an institutional double-bind that manifests at every level of university governance: the domestic mandate requires scholars to "write papers on the soil of the motherland," focusing on localized applied sciences and domestic socio-economic issues, while the global mandate establishes that institutional prestige, international recruitment, and global soft power still depend heavily on climbing the very Anglo-American leader boards the policy attempts to problematize.

This structural contradiction is driven by the state's own evaluation mechanisms. While the MoE's second round of Double First-Class selections in 2022 formally shifted toward a qualitative, discipline-based review system, the financial and geopolitical rewards distributed by local municipal governments and central agencies remain tightly bound to international prestige. Top-tier Chinese universities cannot afford to withdraw from the QS or THE rankings because their global status directly influences their capacity to attract elite international faculty, secure transnational research funding, and project state soft power. As Ka Ho Mok notes, China is executing a dual-track strategy: it seeks to establish domestic autonomy and regional leadership while maintaining intense competition within the pre-existing, Western-dominated global knowledge economy.

Limitations and Risks of the New Academic Hegemony

A rigorous scholarly assessment requires looking past the anti-imperialist rhetoric of counter-hegemony to analyze the risks, structural limitations, and new asymmetries introduced by this model:

- **Ideological Conformity and Restricted Knowledge Production:** The Anglo-American university model, despite its market-driven biases and legacy structures, maintains a baseline commitment to institutional autonomy and academic freedom. The Chinese model, by contrast, binds higher education directly to the state's ideological framework. Under the mandate of *Zhongguo tese* (Chinese characteristics), research in the

humanities and social sciences is heavily structured by state-sanctioned parameters. This framework risks replacing the market-driven constraints of Western institutions with a state-directed ideological monoculture, restricting the critical, self-reflective capacity of the university.

- **The Asymmetry of a Sino centric Periphery:** For partner nations across the Global South, the alternative institutional networks constructed by China do not inherently guarantee egalitarian relations. Given the concentration of financial capital, advanced laboratory infrastructure, and technological patents within China's elite institutions, these networks risk replicating historical core-periphery dependencies under a new configuration. Partner institutions in developing regions risk being positioned as junior providers of local data and regional access, while Chinese hubs retain control over advanced knowledge synthesis and intellectual property.
- **Utilitarian STEM Dominance and Epistemic Displacement:** The alignment of the Double First-Class Initiative with the infrastructure goals of the Belt and Road Initiative leads to a heavily utilitarian focus on STEM fields. While this addresses immediate infrastructure and technical needs, it often sidelines local social sciences and indigenous knowledge systems within partner nations. The result can be an alternative develop mentalist paradigm that proves just as homogenizing as the Western models it seeks to replace.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

China's Double First-Class Initiative offers a powerful template for how a non-Western power can leverage state capacity to challenge entrenched global academic hierarchies, even as it remains entangled within them. By engineering domestic metric reforms, funding localized research agendas, and building parallel educational networks across the Global South, China demonstrates that the global knowledge economy can be shifted toward a multipolar configuration. However, for other Global South countries seeking policy and epistemic autonomy, the Chinese model provides a complex lesson rather than a direct blueprint. Most developing nations possess neither the massive financial capital nor the centralized state leverage required to force a restructuring of global academic standards. Furthermore, the rigid ideological conformity and structural asymmetries inherent in the Chinese model present distinct challenges for nations committed to democratic pluralism and horizontal regional cooperation. Ultimately, the rise of China's higher education model underscores that true policy autonomy for the Global South cannot be achieved by merely switching dependencies from an Anglo-American core to a Sino centric one. Instead, it requires the cultivation of decentralized, horizontal institutional alliances that champion genuine pluriversality. The path forward lies in creating cooperative knowledge spaces that reject subordination to both traditional Western hegemony and the emergent alternative models, ensuring that institutional excellence is defined by and for the communities it serves.

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