CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM: WHAT HAS NOT BEEN CHANGED?

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Executive Summary

1. China's higher education reform has accelerated since the mid-1990s to transform the Soviet-style system into one that would resemble the American system.

2. Through restructuring, comprehensive universities have emerged with provincial and municipal governments becoming a large stakeholder in China's higher education.

3. Such changes have paved the way for unprecedented expansion of higher education since 1999. Insofar as quality is concerned, however, there are growing concerns that this round of reform has not been successful.

4. The failure of the Chinese education system to nurture outstanding talents was raised by Qian Xuesen (钱学森), who symbolizes China's scientific achievement, to Premier Wen Jiabao. His question now provides a rallying point for critics of China's higher education reform.

5. "Bureaucratization" (行政化/官僚化) has been singled out as the root cause of major problems in China's higher education system. Except for private ones, each of Chinese universities is assigned an administrative rank, which defines or certifies how good a university is.

6. University officials are managed by the Party. They are first and foremost bureaucrats rather than educators. Within the university, the institutional setup makes Chinese universities look like government departments.

7. A special interest link has developed between university professors and government officials. The former awards PhD degrees to the latter, while the latter provides access to resources and privileges to the former.

8. Many reform-minded people inside China are deeply concerned about such unhealthy developments. There is mounting criticism of power dominating scholarship (权力宰制学术) and universities have to flatter the government (学府讨好官府).

9. As the state-university relationship remains unchanged, China's huge investment in producing "world-class" universities since the late 1990s has only served to reinforce the importance of administrative rank for resource access, affirm the state as a status conferrer, and provide opportunities for corruption.

10. China is now planning education reform and development for the next decade. The "bureaucratization" issue is on the reform agenda. The document released in February 2010 for public comments recommended a gradual abolition of administrative rankings for universities.

11. There is no guarantee that such a move will take effect, if it is to be implemented. The root problem is not in the universities *per se*, but in the relationship between universities and government.

12. As long as the state remains a central player in the allocation of resources, appointment of personnel and non-meritocratic ranking of universities, what troubles Chinese universities today will continue to trouble them tomorrow, with or without a formal administrative rank.