

371 The Hegemonic and Disciplinary Power of International University Ranking Programmes: Chinese Prestigious Universities under Embroilment

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This study explains the power technique of international university ranking programmes (e.g. QS Rankings, US News Rankings) that are issued by companies in countries other than China but have realised their influence on Chinese prestigious universities. Combining Foucault's theory of discipline (1975) with Gramsci's theory of hegemony (1947), this study proposes a political concept 'to embroil / embroilment' to refer to a post-modernist form of power technique that influences the affairs of modern institutions, that is, in this case, the higher education affairs of modern universities with academic autonomy as one of their principles of modernity. Based on a critical dialogue analysis on policy documents from universities selected as cases, this study shows these universities' administrative reactions to these international rankings and further reflects the power relationship between universities and their external economic subjects in the context of China mainland.

Full paper

This study applies the theories of 'hegemony' and 'discipline' to explain the power technique of international university ranking programmes that have realised their influence on the higher education of Chinese prestigious universities through their administrative and policy-making affairs. This research consists of one theoretical study and one empirical study.

A propose of the concept of 'embroil' based on Foucault's theory of discipline (1975) with Gramsci's theory of hegemony (1947) is the highlight of the theoretical part of this research. A Gramscian view is employed to elaborate the power relation between the initiators of rankings and Chinese HEIs; a Foucauldian view is adopted to analyse the power technique from the power subject to HEI interior. A combination of them two is proposed to explain different types of foundation on which the power of ratings/rankings in China is based: obedience (punishment), consent (hegemony), and enthusiastic desire (discipline). On one hand, the mechanism of "hegemony" together with "passive revolution" is applied to explain the power relation of "embroil". The embroiling power includes three subjects: (1) the HEIs as the embroiled recipient, (2) the society of higher education where the hegemonic power occurs, and (3) the external social power subject as the embroiling initiator. Thus, the embroiling process is that the political or economic subjects launch higher education activities (i.e. university rankings), forming a hegemony over the universities. The concept of "passive revolution" is applied not only to explain the existence of hegemony, but also to show the advantage of its mechanism over an "active" revolution. On the other hand, the mechanism of "discipline" is applied to explain the "embroiling" power technique that indirectly influences HEIs' administrative affairs. In the process of embroiling power occurring, the surveillance link of discipline refers to the process that ranking/rating indicators are created by the initiators to highlight certain norms in the society of higher education; the normalisation happens when the HEIs are pursuing those norms as accepted behaviours; and the internalisation takes place when administrators form their inner desire to conform to those norms. In summary, 'to embroil' is the mechanism that enables or even empowers an economic subject to surveil, standardise, and commensurate (different) modern universities, as well as to hierarchise the universities according to the companies' evaluation criteria (international ranking metrics); in this case, 'embroilment' is the process that ranking companies realise their hegemonic power over Chinese prestigious universities to gradually make them accept, normalise and even internalise their educational values (essentially its educational standards which should have been external to the universities according to the principle of academic autonomy) of their own free will.

Critical Dialogue Analysis (CDA) is central to the empirical approach of this study, as it provides the methodological framework through which to interrogate the documents that constitute the data for this project. Rooted in Foucault's theory of dialogue order, the main purpose of CDA is to expose the relationship between discourse (in documents) and ideology (in documents). The document analysis of this study addresses what can be empirically observed (documents data) and attempts to see through them to the worlds of the actual and the real (Fairclough 2005; Fairclough et al. 2002), taking a "dialectical relational" approach to discourse analysis (Fairclough 2010) and seeking to locate semiotic phenomena "within their necessary dialectical relations with persons (hence minds, intentions, desires, bodies), social relations, and the material world—locating them within the practical engagement of embodied and socially organised persons with the material world" (Fairclough et al. 2002: 3). As CDA involves a belief that "texts are both socially-structuring and socially-structured" (Fairclough et al. 2002: 3), the primary sources of data for this study are policy and administrative documents together with media files from both the implementer (ranking companies) and participators (Chinese prestigious universities) of international rankings. This study explores what institutional adaptation in terms of discipline construction and research development have been conducted by Chinese prestigious universities to face the change of international higher education standards. This study outlines a thorough policy and documentary assessment of the international ranking system that is evolving in the university sector in the Chinese context. The theoretical framework engages Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and Foucault's concepts of discipline to energise the idea of a consensus building ranking system in China. This study also addresses the ways in which the rating system can be viewed as a power formation that may or could be seen as a kind of revolution of sorts, taking place in and through higher education.

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