

University Rankings: Implications for Higher Education in Taiwan*William Yat Wai Lo*

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This main purpose of this book is to contextualise and theorise the university ranking phenomenon in the specific context of Taiwan and to fully discuss the relationship between local university development and global competition between universities. The structure of this book includes eight chapters which are broadly divided into three parts. First, the author explains with much clarity the research background, methodology and theoretical foundations (Chapter 1) and broadly illustrates the social transformation of higher education system in Taiwan since the 1990s (Chapter 2). The author moves onto a theorisation of university rankings under the umbrella of neoliberal ideology and the political structure of “transnationality” and “heterarchical governance” (pp. 42-48) (Chapter 3). Second, empirical data collected from interviewees from five Taiwanese universities are put into a theoretical framework which distinguishes the four analytical dimensions of this research, embracing influences (Chapter 4), normative power (Chapter 5), global landscape (Chapter 6) and antinomy of power (Chapter 7). More specifically, the foundations of Chapters 4 and 5 depart from an ecological perspective and Chapters 6 and 7 turn to consider the geographical perspective. These four chapters directly resonate with the theorisation of university rankings in Chapter 3. Third, the author addresses the implications (ecology and geography) and provides reflections (methodology and theory) for future research.

Broadly speaking, the main argument of this research focusses on four dimensions of the ranking phenomenon with the intention of grasping the mechanism of global competition. The author provides a solid foundation for theorising university rankings within compressed time and space, as adopted from Giddens’ theory of globalisation at three stratified levels (macro, meso and micro). The foundations of meso (organisational) and macro (individual) level encompasses Foucault’s notion of “disciplinary power” (pp. 6, 161) and Bourdieu’s notion of “game playing” (pp. 7, 105). Those of macro (national and international) are chiefly underpinned by Altbach’s critical discourse of “neo-colonialism” and “dependency” in higher education (pp. 7, 51) and Marginson’s “antinomy of the knowledge economy” (pp. 7, 68). Before preceding the concrete analysis of university ranking phenomenon, the author reconciles the dichotomous traditional debate between “structuralism” and “post-structuralism” within “neo-institutionalism”, and then justifies university rankings as a “technology” and a “concept” (pp. 59-70). To put it another way, two perspectives (ecology and geography) and two conceptions (technology and concept) framed at three levels primarily constitutes the analytical framework of this research which deals with the contradiction between generalisation and particularity with reference to university ranking phenomenon. The four-dimensional framework interwoven by two perspectives and two conceptions, comprising the notion of “ecological-technical” (Chapter 4), ecological-conceptual (Chapter 5), geographical-technical (Chapter 6) and geographical-conceptual (Chapter 7), tends to



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deepen the understanding of capturing the social reality and mechanism of the Taiwanese university ranking phenomenon (p. 11).

The analysis of main chapters in the second part (from Chapter 4 to Chapter 7) was mainly based on the methodological framework and theoretical perspectives discussed in the first part. Most of the core discussion revolves around the abstraction of “dichotomisation” or even “trichotomisation” back and forth between Taiwanese empirical data and aforementioned critical theories to discover the conflicts and contradictions embedded in real situations, including “differentiation and concentration of resources” (Chapter 4), “evaluation and competition” (Chapter 4), “research and teaching” (Chapter 4), “love and hate complex” (Chapter 5), “bright side (diverse openness) and dark side (homogenous closeness)” (Chapter 7) and “governing tool, zoning technology and mechanisms of agenda setting” (Chapter 6). More concretely, the main idea in Chapter 4 is how university ranking exerts a far-reaching influence on Taiwanese higher education policy at policy making, organisational and individual levels (p. 81). Three reasons are identified through empirical data which accounts for changes at different levels, including “policies and system arrangements” (involving in differentiation and concentration of resources), “differentiation and concentration of resources” (involving in evaluation and competition) and “reactions and reflections of academics” (pp. 81-99) (involving dilemma in teaching and research tasks). Moving forward to Chapter 5, Foucault’s “disciplinary power” and Bourdieu’s “hierarchy of academic disciplines” are used to examine the normative power struggle of “love-hate complex” in Taiwanese higher education arena (p. 103). This largely explains that the “penetration of power” is, to a great degree, based on the differentiated preference of embracing competition or struggling for autonomy at the level of individual institutions and faculty members (p. 106). On the other side, Chapters 6 and 7 put a high premium on the application of the geographical perspective. In Chapter 6, the author classifies the university ranking as “governing tool”, “zoning technology” and “mechanism of agenda setting” (pp. 119-133) which are embedded in the discussion of “geo-politics” in higher education and stress the university ranking phenomenon is a geo-political product of global landscape. Moreover, the author adopts the notion of “antinomy of the power” to elucidate the competing forces between the construction of world-class worldwide and the resistance of world hegemony in line with the spirits of dialectical and reflexive methodology. The interaction between state policy, institution (organisational behaviour) and global paradigm is composed of “hard power” (state policy-institution) and “soft power relations” (global paradigm-state policy and global paradigm-institution) (pp. 139-142), further interweaving the specific experience of “openness” (diversity) and “closeness” (homogeneity) in the development of higher education in Taiwan (pp. 142-153). Simply put, these four chapters answer the three research questions posed by the author in Chapter 1, including the “influence and theorisation of university rankings” and “how the emergence of Taiwanese university rankings is activated within the context of global landscape” (p. 5).

On the whole, the logic and layer of argumentative structure between theories and empirical data is considerably coherent and rigorous. The book indicates that the constitution of local knowledge concerning the Taiwanese university ranking phenomenon is largely attributed to the exercise of “ecological” and “geographical” mechanisms in the global context of convergence and homogenisation. To be critical, there are three reflexive aspects that could be further considered. First, one possible limitation is that the research fails to discuss not only the influence of cultural norms and ideologies at the three levels, such as the role of “Confucianism” and “communitarianism”, but the dynamic interactions between specific Taiwanese academic cultures and the invasive culture of global capitalism as well. Second, in addition to cultural dimension, the extended question that needs to be asked is whether the western (European) theories (such as Foucault’s and Bourdieu’s

theoretical perspectives, etc.) are particularly suitable to account for the university ranking phenomenon in Taiwan. Accordingly, this conceptual-driven argument relies too heavily on the top-down approach of power interpretation on university ranking, but rather overlooks much of the folk history and ethnographic analysis (bottom-up approach), such as the reason why academics and students in Taiwan either reproduce or resist against this disciplinary system of university ranking. Third, in terms of an inferential perspective, the author could further elaborate on the dialectical relations between empirical evidence, social facts and generative mechanism. For example, what kinds of empirical evidence quantitatively or qualitatively underpin the objective formation of social facts and in what way the empirical evidence and social facts could retroactively infer the existence of generative mechanism that dominates the subjectivity of higher education development in Taiwan. To conclude, this book is indeed well-structured and useful for those who would like to explore and capture the elusive university ranking phenomenon in Taiwan within the context of global capitalism and post-colonialism.

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Les Indes et l'Europe. Histoires connectées XVe-XXIe siècles (India, Southeast Asia and Europe. A New History from 15th Century to 21st Century). Maps, chronology, glossary, bibliography, notes and index

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India, Southeast Asia and Europe

This book covers a vast region currently divided in two macro-regions, South Asia and “Oriental India” or Southeast Asia, between the fifteenth and twenty-first centuries.

Seen from Europe, this huge tropical region is “a very large open trade space” (p. 9).

The two authors published original historical books on this region. Markovits is an Emeritus Director of Research at the CNRS, specialist in colonial and contemporary India. Margolin is teaching at the University of Aix-en-Provence and also a Researcher at the CNRS (IrAsia). He is a specialist of Southeast Asia who, among other research, clearly analysed the complex question of communism.

Evidently colonial oppression and imperial nostalgia existed too much. This book presents a new historical vision. Margolin and Markovits’ new study courageously tries to put in relationship between Europeans academics and South and Southeast Asian scholars and intellectuals.

There are many European studies of this particular Asian region, but very few local studies of the Europeans seen by Asians (p. 737). Asian and European academic visions were not compatible. This study covers a new synthetic colonial history.