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Features of university management in Russia and China*

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Abstract. The article presents a short overview of the key features of university management in the Chinese and Russian higher education systems. First, the authors conduct a brief comparative analysis of the historical trends in the development of higher education, focusing on the idea and model of classical university, which varied significantly depending on the cultural and educational traditions of different countries and over time produced many other types of higher education institutions. Then the article provides short, generalized descriptions of the Russian and Chinese higher education systems, emphasizing differences in their structure as based on the nature of institutions and their functional priorities. Finally, the authors suggest an explanation of the features (advantages and shortcomings) of the Chinese and Russian approaches and models of university management as determined by the scale of state control and centralization, integration with national development plans and economic strategy, research and academic autonomy, and by the balance between the legacy of the past and the demands of (regional and national) labor market and global competition. Since the article is rather a reflection on the topic, the authors deliberately abandoned the use of footnotes and presented the reader only a small part of references used.

Key words: Russian universities; Chinese universities; higher education system; university management model; state control; centralization; national development plans; national economic strategy; academic autonomy; market demands; global competition

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Today's university is a higher education institution combining educational activities with scientific research and social-cultural development. Historically, universities were originally classical (typically including departments of philosophy, theology, medicine, and law), but their models varied significantly depending on the cultural and educational traditions of different countries. First classical universities

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were established in Europe during the Middle Ages and became the foundation for higher education in many countries. The most well-known are the German, British, and French models. The German model is characterized by an emphasis on scientific research and teaching, today such universities are global centers of scientific thought, maintaining academic freedoms and research autonomy. In the UK, classical universities have strong traditions of individualized study and academic mentoring, emphasizing liberal education and the development of well-rounded individuals. In France, the most well-known universities retain features of the classical European university model, but with greater state control, focus on training specialists in specific fields and a strict hierarchy of curricula. The American model of the classical university places significant emphasis on the humanities. In general, today's classical universities are characterized by a broader range of faculties and specialties, but, as in past centuries, they still play a key role in society by training highly qualified specialists who contribute to scientific progress and cultural development. Thus, universities are the foundation of the educational system in any country, regardless of its level of economic development, as they form the main intellectual and research resources of the state.

In addition to classical universities, there are other types of higher education institutions, such as entrepreneurial universities, online universities and universities focused on training highly specialized professionals. Entrepreneurial universities focus on innovation, startups, and development of new technologies, often closely linked to industry and practical training. Online universities provide educational opportunities online, making learning accessible to people around the world. In recent years, hybrid university models have also developed, combining traditional forms of education with online courses. While new university models develop, classical universities remain the primary types of educational institutions in most countries. The presence of other types of universities depends on the higher education development goals of each country and government programs. For example, some governments support the development of online universities or universities focused on practical training, which align with the state economic needs and strategic priorities. Therefore, the contemporary university management system is based on the classical university model which includes several interconnected subsystems performing academic, scientific, financial, administrative, and other functions. The unified university management model is adapted to the specific requirements of the university type and the national educational system, which determines many university management models that share common features with other countries but also have specific characteristics related to the history of education, economic situation, cultural and social factors.

Russia has a diverse higher education system with many educational institutions. In its three-level system based on the nature of institutions and their functional focus, the top level is constituted by leading national universities; the second level — by federal universities of strategic importance divided into three

categories — federal research universities, federal industry-specific technological universities and federal regional universities; the third level — by regional applied institutions, including regional classical universities, regional specialized institutes and private higher education institutions. Based on specialization fields, six main categories of universities can be distinguished: classical universities, engineering technical, pedagogical, medical, arts and culture, military universities. The university management system has several key features: universities can be state and private, thus reporting to different levels of governance (state universities — to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education). Key elements of management in the typical Russian university include: rector — the head of the university, responsible for strategic management and development; university (supervisory) board — the main body overseeing the university's activities (representatives of the academic and scientific community, external partners, for instance employers); academic Council — the body responsible for the development of scientific activity, research projects and studies.

Private universities enjoy greater flexibility in terms of educational programs and financial management but also adhere to the basic legal and regulatory requirements established by the Ministry of Education and Science. Private universities often focus on narrower fields of study related to economics, management and other in-demand professions. At private universities, rector is also the primary governing body, but founders or investors often participate in decision-making. Regional universities report to local authorities, have more freedom to address local issues but also adhere to federal standards in education and science. In Russia, a centralized model of university management predominates — universities are significantly overseen by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, but large universities enjoy a higher degree of academic autonomy.

In China, modernization of the higher education system began relatively late compared to Russia, where it developed over centuries. Despite this late start, China has achieved enormous success in higher education by combining international experience with local innovation. As of 2024, China has 3,119 universities, and its student population exceeds 48.46 million, making the Chinese higher education system the largest in the world. Having absorbed the experience of European and American research universities, Russian traditions of academic autonomy and East Asian approaches to applied technical education, China has gradually formed a diverse higher education system combining state, private and joint (with foreign participation) universities, each operating within a unique governance logic — from administrative coordination in state universities to market orientation in private ones and transnational synergy in joint ones.

The Chinese approach to university management is characterized by strong state control and integration with national development plans and economic strategy. Chinese higher education institutions are classified according to various criteria. The most common is the nature of their founding and funding: state,

private, and joint universities. State universities are established and funded primarily through budgetary allocations (national or regional), form the backbone of the higher education system. Private universities are established and funded through private investment, donations and tuition fees, and play an increasingly significant role in expanding access to higher education. Their curricula are distinguished by a pronounced focus on the labor market needs. The number of private universities reached 803 as of 2024, accounting for 25.75% of the country's total. Joint universities are Chinese partnerships with foreign universities aimed at integrating international educational standards and training personnel with globally in-demand competences. These universities are characterized by the widespread use of bilingual (Chinese English) or entirely English-language instruction, but there are also examples of the successful Chinese Russian cooperation in the form of joint educational institutions.

The university management system in China has traditionally been characterized by a high level of state control, but in recent years, there is a trend toward de-centralization. The state exerts significant influence on university management, particularly at institutions under the control of the Ministry of Education or local governments. Specifically, the state sets key educational priorities, such as research focus, educational programs, and even faculty salaries. A unique feature of China is the direct influence of the Chinese Communist Party on universities, particularly the large ones. Each university has a party organization that coordinates political education and enforces party discipline, can also influence research directions and personnel decisions.

In China, universities often have a traditional hierarchical model: Party Committee — a body with significant influence on decision-making, particularly in the areas of personnel matters and political oversight; rector is appointed by a government agency, including through approval by the Ministry of Education or local authorities; board of directors in large universities — consists of representatives of government, industry, and faculty, makes strategic decisions on funding, development, and changes to curricula; deans are responsible for the management of academic programs and research in their fields. State universities are governed by the rector's responsibility system under the leadership of the Communist Party Primary Committee; rector is the main representative of the university's executive power, directs its development and is responsible for its day-to-day management. In private universities, the internal management system consists of a supreme governing body (board of directors), an executive administration led by rector, and a party committee as a mandatory element of management. Joint universities also have a system of rectoral responsibility under the leadership of the board of directors (joint management committee) and a party committee, whose functions are similar to those in private universities.

Certainly, university management has its unique characteristics determined by the political, economic and educational contexts of each country. In China,

a centralized university management system with limited autonomy prevails, with the state and the Communist Party playing a key role. Each educational institution has a party organization that oversees all aspects of university life. The Chinese higher education system presents a unique model of public administration, combining centralized strategic leadership with flexible research autonomy. This system is based on three key elements: clear guidelines and targeted funding for leading universities; a standardized centralized management model that ensures optimal resource allocation through a hierarchical system; a focus on national development priorities, which creates synergies between education, science and technological sovereignty, and ensures 98% employment rate for graduates from elite universities in key economic sectors.

At the same time, such a centralized management system has several shortcomings. First, most universities operate within a strict state framework which limits their ability to make independent decisions: the Ministry of Education regulates funding, curricula, and personnel policies, which is why many universities, especially private and small ones, face difficulties in implementing innovative initiatives and adapting to rapidly changing labor market demands. Second, there is a significant funding gap between elite and regional universities: larger and more prominent universities receive greater government support, which allows them to develop programs and infrastructure, while lesser-known institutions remain at a disadvantage. Furthermore, approximately 40% of graduates experience a mismatch between the skills they acquire and employer requirements — this proves the need for greater flexibility and adaptability in educational programs, which is also hampered by the centralized management system. All these factors confirm that the centralized management system significantly limits the autonomy of universities in China, hindering their development and adaptation to contemporary challenges.

In Russia, the centralized management model also predominates — universities, particularly state ones, operate under significant control of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. However, many universities, particularly large classical and technical ones, possess a high degree of academic and research autonomy. Universities with applied and industry-focused approaches actively collaborate with external partners from various sectors, adding an element of management flexibility.

From a historical perspective, the Chinese university management system clearly demonstrates a development trajectory determined from above — by state priorities. Three key stages in the development of today's university management model can be identified: adoption of the Soviet model immediately after the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949–1977), market transformation during the reform and opening-up period (1978–1998), and intensive development in the new millennium (1999–present). These stages not only consistently transformed the management system but also rapidly expanded the scale of higher education and its reach among

the Chinese population. The divergent vectors of the higher education evolution are determined by three key factors: the specifics of the historical past (Soviet legacy, post-socialist transformations, market orientation, etc.), degree of government intervention (strict centralization), and resource availability (government investments, reliance on regional businesses and local communities).

China demonstrates that successful modernization of the higher education system is possible through a synthesis of global practices and national specifics, taking into account the common challenge of post-socialist countries to find a balance between the legacy of the past and the demands of global competition, and also the need to overcome systemic limitations hindering the integration of Chinese universities into the global educational space. In terms of organizational management structure, Chinese universities implement a unique national model — responsibility of the rector under the leadership of the Party committee. Although this model has significant advantages in ensuring sustainable development and political stability, in practice it faces systemic contradictions caused by the imbalance between the academic and administrative branches of management.

In the post-Soviet period, the Russian higher education system has implemented a more differentiated reform strategy. For example, the “Priority 2030” program follows a multi-level funding model, dividing universities into three categories — research universities, regional flagship and universities of applied technology — and plans to restore the 5–6-year specialist degree system already in 2026. This path to the higher education reform contrasts with China’s national strategy focused on global breakthroughs in the project “Two First Class Universities” but simultaneously outlines opportunities for cooperation between China and Russia in higher education. The contemporary Chinese higher education system is based on a unique combination of institutional diversity and a clear hierarchical structure with state universities playing a leading role and their activities complemented by private universities. National-level universities receive priority funding and enjoy special status, ultimately creating a strictly stratified higher education system. In terms of training profiles, the Chinese higher education system is formed by multidisciplinary research universities, industry-specific universities, and applied technical institutes. This differentiation allows the country to effectively meet the diverse needs of the national economy for qualified personnel in various fields.

At the same time, a distinctive feature of the Chinese higher education system is its ability to combine centralized strategic planning with the flexibility to respond to regional demands. Essentially, this is a model of “regulated diversity” which is particularly important for countries with significant territorial differences and social-economic disparities. Therefore, unlike in Russia, where universities gained significant autonomy in choosing specializations after the 1990s, in China, the distribution of educational institutions by type and level of training is closely linked to state planning for the national economy needs. China’s model of higher education, on the one hand, ensures training of specialists in line with national

development priorities, on the other hand, offers students broad opportunities for educational choice, albeit within strictly defined boundaries.

The stratification of higher education in Russia has similar characteristics with China but develops in a different institutional context. Elite Russian universities are similar in their role and model of targeted state funding to Chinese universities included in the “Two First Class Universities” Project. However, the scale of investment and degree of administrative control from the center are incomparably greater in China. Federal and national research universities in Russia are similar to Chinese regional flagships but often have a more diffuse strategy and face greater difficulties integrating with the regional economy. Large-scale regional and flagship universities in Russia, like in China, struggle to balance survival and fulfilling their social mission under chronic underfunding. A key difference between the two systems lies in the role of the private sector: in China, private universities and independent colleges are a mass phenomenon with millions of students, while in Russia, private higher education remains marginal, lacking public trust and playing no significant role in fulfilling state objectives. Another important difference between the two university systems is the stratification mechanism: in China, it is more formalized, transparent and determined by state “projects”, thus creating a rigid yet predictable structure; in Russia, gradation is more fluid and often depends on dynamic competition for status and resources, thus creating specific features of university management and evaluation.

Thus, the strengths and limitations of the Chinese higher education management system are interrelated and stem from the “dual track” model, in which state universities focus on strategic national development objectives, while private universities respond quickly to market demand. This dualism creates an institutionally flexible and adaptive system capable of meeting the changing needs of key stakeholders. In this sense, the Chinese model of university management differs fundamentally from the Russian model, which retains a traditional focus on “academic elitism” (historically dominant position of state universities shape the entire higher education system). The Russian model of university management occupies a kind of intermediate position between the Chinese model and the European and American models characterized by a framework of state regulation and a combination of the principles of academic autonomy in decision-making with a market orientation in competition for students, faculty, and research grants.

On the one hand, Russian higher education retains strong state regulation manifested in the system of per capita funding and state assignments; on the other hand, there are attempts to introduce elements of university autonomy through programs such as “Priority 2030”. However, unlike China, where the level of academic autonomy is clearly linked to national priorities, in Russia their relationship is less systemic. In general, the Chinese and Russian models of university management reflect the specifics of national educational traditions and political systems: the Chinese model emphasizes a combination of party leadership with targeted support for leading

universities, while the Russian model still struggles to find a balance between market mechanisms and academic freedom, state regulation and university autonomy. Today, both systems require transformation, but their promising directions differ significantly: in China, the primary objective is to further improve interaction between different segments of the educational system, particularly through the development of academic mobility mechanisms; in Russia, the primary objective is to overcome the existing monopoly of state academic education. China's two-level system — state universities receive significantly more funding, while private universities compensate for this limitation with their market flexibility — maintains a significant imbalance in resource allocation and infrastructure. Like the Chinese model, the Russian university management system is characterized by a high concentration of resources in state universities but demonstrates relatively low efficiency in their use, particularly in terms of commercialization of research, while private universities face serious limitations in terms of scale and a lack of public recognition.

China's experience may be interesting and important for Russia, since it demonstrates effective mechanisms for combining national strategic priorities with the goal of integrating into the global educational space; China's "controlled autonomy" model could serve as a benchmark for creating key universities and research-educational centers in Russia. Certainly, the differences between two countries in their choice of reform trajectories cannot be overlooked: China adheres to a consistent linear strategy, while Russia pursues more cyclical models of transformation. In today's geopolitical context, Russian researchers and administrators can study and apply China's experience in scientific and technological self-sufficiency and the "dual governance" model as a successful approach to the organic combination of state regulation and academic autonomy. The higher education management systems of China and Russia represent two distinct paths of institutional transformation, reflecting their historical trajectories and contemporary challenges in educational policy. The Chinese reform model is characterized by gradual systemic improvement while preserving its fundamental principles and core; the higher education management system in Russia underwent a systemic overhaul after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with reforms primarily focused on decentralizing governance, expanding stakeholder participation, and transitioning to legal regulation of university activities. Russian universities gained significant autonomy but faced new challenges, such as coordination between different levels, stable funding, and ensuring uniform educational quality standards. Both systems strive to find a balance between administrative efficiency and democratic principles: the Chinese model emphasizes systemic management and strategic coordination ensured by party leadership, while the Russian model emphasizes pluralism and stakeholder engagement. It is noteworthy that Chinese universities with relatively limited formal autonomy demonstrate high adaptability to the demands of the time, while the Russian system with broader legislatively ensured autonomy faces problems of strategic coordination.

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Особенности университетского управления в России и Китае *

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Аннотация. В статье представлен краткий обзор ключевых особенностей управления университетами в китайской и российской системах высшего образования. Сначала авторы проводят краткий сравнительный анализ исторических тенденций развития высшего обра-

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зования, сосредоточившись на идее и модели классического университета, которые значительно варьировали в зависимости от культурных и образовательных традиций разных стран и со временем породили множество других типов высших учебных заведений. Затем в статье представлены краткие обобщенные описания российской и китайской систем высшего образования и подчеркнуты различия в их структуре, обусловленные национальными типологиями вузов и их функциональными приоритетами. Наконец, авторы предлагают объяснение особенностей (преимуществ и недостатков) китайского и российского подходов и моделей управления университетами как детерминированных масштабами государственного контроля и централизации, интеграции с национальными планами развития и экономической стратегией, научно-исследовательской и академической автономии, а также балансом между наследием прошлого и требованиями (регионального и национального) рынка труда и глобальной конкуренции. Поскольку статья представляет собой размышления на тему, авторы целенаправленно отказались от ссылок и предлагают читателю лишь небольшую часть использованного в подготовке статьи библиографического аппарата.

Ключевые слова: российские университеты; китайские университеты; система высшего образования; модель университетского управления; государственный контроль; централизация; национальные планы развития; национальная экономическая стратегия; академическая автономия; рыночные требования; глобальная конкуренция

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