LI Mei

From Teacher-Education University to Comprehensive University: Case Studies of East China Normal University, Southwest University and Yanbian University

Abstract Three different “logics”—that of the internal strategies of the institutions, the economic pressures of the socialist market economy and the political policies of the state drive the development of a university. The dynamic interaction and coexistence of the three logics has determined the transformation models of teacher-education or normal universities in China. This paper aims at describing and analyzing both the process and the forces that led to these transformations by taking East China Normal University (ECNU), Southwest University (SWU) and Yanbian University (YBU) as examples. Reliance on government and market resources has put these universities into a dilemma: On the one hand, they wanted to retain their original features so as to preserve their leading position in the “teacher education” market, and on the other, they needed to merge, expand, restructure and enhance their quality as they pursued overall development. The case analyses show that the teacher-education university’s need for self-development, which is the internal determinant, plays a critical role in its transformation. At the same time, the socioeconomic environment and national policies influence the institution while it displays considerable capacity for self-adjustment.

Keywords normal/teacher-education universities, comprehensiveness, East China Normal University (ECNU), Southwest University (SWU), Yanbian University (YBU)
Normal school\(^1\) originated in France after the French Revolution in 1794. However, a distinctive and well-rounded system of normal education is unique to China. Even though the seed came from France, the soil of Chinese culture, which emphasizes education and respect for teachers, led to a blossoming of normal education in modern China. China has thousands of years of cultural traditions which gave the teacher a place in the universe’s hierarchy: “Heaven, Earth, the Monarch, Parents and Teachers” (\(tian \ di \ jun \ qin \ shi\)). In the Chinese traditional examination system, which existed for more than one thousand years, individuals entered the government bureaucracy by passing a series of imperial examinations and became the cultural elites of the ruling class. Those students who did not succeed in the mid-level examinations or those who did not manage to gain bureaucratic titles at the next level had no choice but to take up the role of “private teachers.” The intellectuals and members of the ruling class in ancient China sustained the smooth functioning of Chinese society as well as the propagation and diversification of Chinese culture.

In modern times, the role of teachers changed. The teaching profession increasingly became a career open to ordinary people. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese government set up an independent system of normal education, with normal schools, colleges and universities at different levels as one sector within higher education, which was supported through specific policies, resources and administrative measures. In this way, a distinctive yet closed teacher-education system was built. After the reform and opening-up of the late 1970s, however, a new strategy of “science and education to revitalize the nation” was proposed. There was a new awareness that national prosperity relied upon education, education, in turn, relied upon teachers, and normal colleges and universities shouldered the entire responsibility of cultivating tens of thousands of teachers. However, due to the relatively low income and social status associated with the teaching profession and the impact of the market economy, many teachers had begun to quit the profession in order to start businesses or enter other professions in the 1980s. To

---

\(^1\) The terms normal school and normal university are derived from French, where “normale” means “setting a moral standard or pattern.” The term “normal” fits Chinese culture so well that almost all teacher education institutions carry the title of “normal.” Meanwhile, according to Hayhoe (2009), “the term ‘normal school’ has disappeared from the Anglo-American academic discourse and the term normal university has never been well understood. Most Anglophones are unaware of the original French meaning of “normale” as “setting a moral standard or pattern. It is interesting to note that the model of the French normal school and university was influential in both China and Japan.”
ensure the training of sufficient qualified teachers for elementary and secondary schools, China had always had a policy of fee-free teacher education.

In the 1990s, government policies for teacher education have been gradually and systematically improved, yet at the same time teaching as a profession and normal universities responsible for teacher education have encountered serious challenges. Along with efforts to ensure basic education for all and improvement in the quality of schools at all levels, and the emergence of mass higher education, China’s central government enacted new teacher education policies in 1999. The intention was to establish an open yet diverse system of teacher education, which encouraged comprehensive universities as well as other higher institutions outside the normal education sector to contribute to teacher training.

In this social environment normal universities, which had always seen themselves as embodying the noble calling of “setting a model for the nation in their high standards of learning,” found themselves in fierce competition with comprehensive universities and poly-technical institutions with respect to student enrollment, faculty appointments, funding, research projects and academic development. To compete for policy support and resources from the government, normal universities have done everything possible to promote their own development, including internal restructuring, merging, enrollment expansion and upgrading. By these means they tried to gain acceptance within such high profile national university development projects as “Project 211" and “Project 985”.

Only through reform and development could normal schools retain their competitive advantages and overcome a crisis that has threatened their very survival. In this process, several problems had to be overcome. First, due to the lack of attractiveness of the teaching profession, they were not able to enroll students of the highest quality. Second, due to the nature of normal education, it was not easy to gain market oriented research contracts. Teacher education is of fundamental societal importance, since the quality of teachers is crucial to the overall public welfare. However, unlike universities with business schools and a range of technological fields, teacher-education institutions lacked the potential for industrial applications or commercialization. Normal universities thus found themselves unable to compete with comprehensive universities or technological institutions in the market. With no priority investments from the government, and an inability to acquire market resources, normal universities had no choice but to

---

2 Project 211 is a Chinese government policy launched in 1995, aiming at strengthening about 100 institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the 21st century.

3 Project 985 is a Chinese government policy launched in May of 1998, at the centennial ceremony of Peking University, to select a small group of elite universities with key investments that would enable them to achieve world class standing.
transform themselves into comprehensive universities, developing new applied and cross-disciplinary programs. Since they had a solid foundation in both the humanities and the basic sciences, for historical reasons, normal universities were able to develop some new fields that linked their original specialties to the needs of the market, combining research and industrial applications. This is one of the main reasons why normal universities under the Ministry of Education struggled to transform themselves into comprehensive institutions even in face of the government decision that normal universities were not allowed to merge with other types of university, only with lower level educational institutions which they were expected to upgrade. This may also explain why American normal education was absorbed into major comprehensive universities in the 19th century. Such a transformation not only improved the quality and level of teacher education and the academic standards for teachers, but it also helped to attract higher quality students as well as market resources.

Normal institutions, however, do have unique characteristics. Hayhoe suggested that attitudes towards scholarship in normal institutions were somewhat different from those within comprehensive universities. Normal institutions have tended to emphasize overall moral cultivation and approach each basic area of knowledge in an integrated manner, thus focusing on the development of professional skills for a teaching career. By contrast, comprehensive universities stress theoretical subjects and emphasize the boundaries among specific disciplines of knowledge (Hayhoe, 2003; Hayhoe & Li, 2010). In other words, normal education emphasizes liberal education and moral cultivation, focusing on the spiritual development of the self and social responsibility. However, normal institutions often face the criticism from society that they fail to achieve a balance between their “normal character” and good “standards of scholarship” and thus in fact fail to cultivate high-quality teachers (Ye, 1995). Education is a practical field that integrates knowledge from diverse subject areas. It is not the same as basic disciplines of the humanities nor is it the same as other applied disciplines. Notably, traditional humanities subjects typically focus on pure knowledge while applied disciplines are gaining popularity because they focus on the application of knowledge, which may have a direct impact on economic and industrial development.

State Policy for Teacher Education and Its Influence

In 1897, Sheng Xuanhuai founded the Nanyang Public School in Shanghai, which was the beginning of the establishment of normal schools in China. Since then, normal education in China has undergone a century of ups and downs. The development of normal education can be divided into four phases. The first phase
from 1897 to 1921 saw substantial German and Japanese influence with the formation of a complete normal education system, mainly consisting of normal schools and colleges whose sole mission was teacher training. The “Guimao Education Act” of 1904 and the “Teacher Education Regulation” of 1912 ensured an independent status for normal education in the emerging modern education system. The second phase, from 1922 to 1948, witnessed the construction of an open teacher education system, mainly influenced by the American education system, with the coexistence of independent normal colleges and normal colleges within comprehensive universities. The third phase, from 1949 to 1998, borrowed its educational ideas heavily from the former Soviet Union. In this phrase, China reestablished independent normal universities, and formed a teacher education system, which consisted of two separated parts, namely, pre-service training and in-service training. The fourth phase, from the 1990s to the present, has seen China re-establish an open teacher education system, in which normal colleges and normal universities function as major teacher education providers while comprehensive universities are also entitled to contribute to teacher education (Guan, 2009).

In the 1950s, a major restructuring of the whole higher education system resulted in a closed and independent teacher-education system with Chinese characteristics coming into being. At the national level, in each of the six regions, namely the North, Northeast, Northwest, East, Central South, and Southwest regions, one national normal university was established. At the provincial level, in each province, one provincial normal university was established. At the city level, teachers colleges were set up in all medium and small-sized cities and prefectural towns. Two-year normal schools were set up within every county. These institutions were for pre-service teacher education. On the other hand, district educational colleges were established in every city district and teacher development schools were set up in every county, which were responsible for teachers’ in-service training and professional development. For the whole second half of the 20th century, this teacher-education system provided for the initial formation as well as the professional development of school teachers, although it did this with separate pre-service and in-service sectors.

As China has succeeded in implementing compulsory education for all and turned to the pursuit of quality in education, the main goal of teacher education has shifted from an emphasis on quantity to quality. In order to meet the requirements of ongoing social and economic development, improving the quality of teachers has replaced the former goal of meeting the ongoing demands for a large supply of teachers (Gu, 2001; Gu, 2006; Zhu & Hu, 2009). Due to an overly simplistic disciplinary structure and rather conservative training models and programs, it became evident that the closed normal education system was not only unable to meet the requirements for high-quality teachers, but was also
incompatible with the environment of an open market economy (Hu, 2009). For this reason, the Chinese government promulgated an official policy document in June of 1999, entitled “Decision of the CPC Central Committee and State Council on Deepening Education Reform and Promoting Comprehensive Quality Education” (thereafter referred to as the “Decision”). The “Decision” clearly put forth as a main policy objective the establishment of an open teacher-education system, as follows: “To strengthen and reform normal education, to greatly improve the quality of teacher training, to adjust the levels and distribution of normal institutions, to encourage comprehensive universities and non-normal colleges to participate in teacher cultivation and training, and to explore the possibility of establishing normal schools within comprehensive universities that have appropriate conditions” (Xie, 2009, p. 61).

A teacher certification system was widely implemented in 2000 after it had been initiated in 1996. The certification system has further strengthened the open teacher-education system. In 2001, the central government further specified its policy objective in the report entitled “Decision of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education” as follows: “To perfect the open teacher-education system in which normal colleges and normal universities function as the main institutions while other higher education institutions participate, and which integrates pre-service and in-service teacher education and training” (Zhang, 2007). Thus, an open teacher-education system has gradually emerged, in which normal universities and colleges are the primary institutions and function in conjunction with other educational organizations to implement teacher education through multi-channel, multi-standard and multi-format modes of training. This has led to two trends: First, the active participation of comprehensive universities and non-normal institutions in teacher education; and secondly, the transformation of normal universities and colleges into more comprehensive institutions under the pressure of competition.

Another major pressure for normal institutions to transform themselves is the expansion of higher education and the emergence of mass higher education in China since the late 1990s. The gross enrollment rate of Chinese higher education has risen from 3.4% in 1990 to 15% in 2002, and then to 23.3% in 2008. Under the dual pressure of mass higher education and the new openness of the teacher education system, most normal education institutions have changed their development direction and transformed themselves into comprehensive universities. Some national key normal universities have been upgraded to comprehensive research universities. By October 2003, the number of normal universities and colleges had decreased from 286 in 1996 to 169, with 16 normal schools or colleges merged into normal universities, 100 merged into or transformed into comprehensive universities, and one transformed into a training
From Teacher-Education University to Comprehensive University

center. Therefore, the overall ratio of normal education institutions in the higher education system has fallen from 25.5% in the early 1980s to 10.9% in 2003 (Zhang, 2007).

In 2007, in order to ensure a sufficient supply of quality teachers in the central and western regions of China, the Ministry of Education implemented a policy of free normal education in its six national normal universities, which is actually a restoration of the free normal education that existed prior to 1997. In June of 2007, the six national normal universities recruited 10,563 free normal students. Among them, 2,600 enrolled in Shaanxi Normal University, 1,352 in Northeast Normal University, 2,945 in Southwest University, 2,200 in Central China Normal University, 1,000 in East China Normal University, and 466 in Beijing Normal University. For these six normal universities, the implementation of the free normal education policy was a boost to their teacher education programs and served to solidify their roles in teacher education. However, free normal education is only provided in the six national normal universities. The other 92 4-year normal institutions and 42 2-3-year sub-degree normal colleges still face the problem of how to survive and develop in an era of mass higher education. Even for the six national normal universities, teacher education is only one of their many fields of study. They still need to enroll students at diversified levels and in a wide range of professional fields, and to conduct research and community service. Therefore, even these universities are facing the same problem of how far to go on the developmental path of comprehensiveness.

This paper compares three teacher-education universities: two national normal universities and one minority comprehensive university that has a significant responsibility for teacher education. The selection of the three cases has the following rationale: First, as national key normal universities, East China Normal University (ECNU) and Southwest University (SWU) serve as models for other normal universities, and have a strong influence on provincial or regional normal universities. Yanbian University (YBU), a minority comprehensive university, for its part, plays an irreplaceable role in the training of the country’s ethnic minority teachers and other talent for leadership at the local level. Second, although all of the three universities feel the profound impact of the move to mass higher education...
education, of the new openness in teacher education, and of decentralization in university governance, they are different in their geographical environments, in their university traditions and in the policy and resource support that they get from the central and local governments. Therefore, while the three universities chose the same developmental path of becoming more comprehensive, the actual development models they chose were quite different. Third, for ECNU and SWU, there was a sharp contrast in their experience of merger and the names they adopted after merger, with one retaining the title “normal university,” and the other not. Their naming decisions reflected the fact that they had each faced a kind of identity crisis, and that each had adopted a different strategy in response to national policy and the needs of society. ECNU chose to keep the name of “normal” while making substantial changes in its programs, whereas SWU chose to remove the term “normal” from its name while retaining many of its original features. YBU is an example of how a comprehensive university has continued its traditional teacher-education function. Below is a comparison of their developmental characteristics in the process of transformation.

### Developmental Characteristics of ECNU, SWU and YBU

#### East China Normal University

*Historical Development: A Socialist Normal University*

In 1951, the Ministry of Education established ECNU in the region of eastern China, on the foundation of two former private universities, Daxia University (founded in 1924) and Guanghua University (founded in 1925). In 1959, the central government designated it as one of the sixteen national key universities. In 1981, it became one of the first doctoral and master’s degree-granting universities in China. In 1986, it established a graduate school. In 1997 and 1998, it sequentially integrated three lower level educational institutions that were merged with it: the Shanghai Early Childhood Teachers College, the Shanghai Institute of Education and the Shanghai Second Institute of Education, the latter two being in-service institutions. It thus established a unique teacher education system which integrated pre-service and in-service programs for teachers. In 1996, it had entered Project 211, which meant it would be co-constructed and co-supervised by both the Ministry of Education and the Shanghai municipal government, but primarily by the Shanghai City Government. In 2006, it entered project 985, being only the second normal university to gain that status. Throughout its 59-year history ECNU has consistently been a high-level university with teacher education as its primary focus.
Special Characteristics: A Comprehensive Research University with Teacher Education in the Lead

In the reorganization of the early 1950s, ECNU incorporated some disciplines in the arts and sciences from several prestigious universities in Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces as well as Shanghai. Thus, ever since its establishment, it has had the characteristics of a high-quality university with a complete set of disciplines in the arts and sciences as well as education (Yuan & Wang, 2001). In the 1980s, the number of disciplines increased gradually, while its graduate programs were strengthened and expanded, its normal education was further solidified and upgraded, and its teaching and research improved. Thanks to its high quality in normal education, ECNU has been recognized as one of “the four prestigious universities in Shanghai,” along with Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University and Tongji University. ECNU has formed thousands of high-quality teachers and management personnel for all levels of schools and even for higher education institutions. Its graduates not only work in Shanghai, but also in the East China region as well as in various parts of the whole country. Although faced with competition from other comprehensive universities since the 1990s, ECNU has always maintained its special role in normal education while further enhancing its overall commitment to excellence. In 2006, the Ministry of Education announced that it was the second normal university to be accepted into Project 985.

Development Strategies: Interdisciplinary Integration, Internationalization and a High Level Talent Plan

Facing the challenge of mass higher education and lively competition with other key normal universities and comprehensive universities, ECNU decided on three major developmental strategies: to be interdisciplinary, to internationalize and to attract high level scholars and professors. In order to become an interdisciplinary university, based on its strengths in both the arts and sciences, and in agreement with the development strategy of Shanghai and the whole country, it has greatly expanded its fields of study in teaching and research since the mid-1980s. At present it consists of 24 colleges, which cover 9 fields of study ranging from the humanities, social sciences, education, the natural sciences, and engineering, all the way to management. In order to internationalize, based on its leading disciplines and making full use of its location in the international metropolis of Shanghai, it has been promoting international outreach in its management, faculty appointments, teaching and research. In order to attract more outstanding scholars and professors, it has been taking measures to improve working conditions and facilities that will attract innovative talent, also to improve the structure of the teaching faculty. After it entered Project 985, through recruitment
efforts that attracted leading experts and career advancement programs for young scholars, it has raised its profile significantly.

Southwest University

Historical Evolution: Normal and Agricultural Universities Merged into a Comprehensive University

SWU is located in the municipality of Chongqing in southwest China. It came into being as a new comprehensive university in July 2005, when with the approval of the Ministry of Education, two neighboring universities which had common origins (Southwest Normal University and Southwest Agricultural University) merged. The history of SWU can be traced back to the establishment of East Sichuan Normal School in 1906 (Southwest Normal School History, 2000). In 1936, it developed into the Sichuan Provincial Normal College. In 1950, it merged with the National Woman’s Normal College (founded in 1940) and became Southwest Normal College. In the same year, three agricultural science departments of Sichuan Provincial Normal College, the private Xianghui College and some departments from the private West China Union University merged to become the Southwest College of Agriculture. In 1985, the two colleges were upgraded and renamed as Southwest Normal University and Southwest Agricultural University. It was in 2005 that they were merged and SWU became a national “211” key university.

Special Characteristics: Aiming to Establish a Comprehensive Research University with Agricultural and Normal Characteristics

Looking back over the century, SWU, now a comprehensive university, developed gradually from its early history as two specialized colleges. The merging of the two colleges, which had already become universities by 1985, has given this university a unique advantage in agriculture and teacher education. Through disciplinary and departmental adjustments, SWU now has 30 colleges, covering 11 fields of study. In addition, it has explored and formed many effective teaching and research models that were suitable for the unique geographic and cultural environment of the southwest region. Furthermore, the university encouraged and supported its faculty to conduct research and develop into a comprehensive research university.

Strategic Choices: Based in the Southwest Region, to Promote Research in Certain Key Fields and to Cultivate All-Round Intellectuals

SWU has a motto which combines the local and the global: “Uniquely established in the southwest, our learning and practice embrace the world.”
Deeply rooted in the southwest, it inherited a spirit of education for the common people, and a tradition of running schools that served society and took responsibility for people’s welfare. Based on the unique natural and human resources in the southwest, SWU has chosen certain key fields to promote in its research, such as educational sciences, life sciences, agriculture, and management. In its teaching programs, SWU has integrated the social and cultural resources of the Southwest into its courses and teaching curricula. The university emphasizes general education, liberal education and social practice, focusing on the all-round development of its students and the nurturing of quality. Since most of its resources come from the southwest, its major strategic choices are made to correspond to the needs of the southwest.

Yanbian University

Historical Development: A Comprehensive University with the Training of Ethnic Korean Teachers as One of Its Missions

Founded in 1949, YBU is located in Yanji City in the Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture of Jilin Province. It is situated in a region of northeast China where the population is predominately ethnic Koreans. In its early history, most teachers and students were Korean and the language of instruction was Korean. In 1959, it started to recruit a certain ratio of Han and other ethnic students, and ever since the language of instruction has been both Mandarin and Korean. It was also in 1959 that YBU was upgraded into a comprehensive university, focusing on cultivating teachers for secondary schools and human resources of different levels (Yu, 2005, pp. 22–31). In 1996, several higher education institutions merged to form the new YBU, including the former Yanbian University, Yanbian Medical College, Yanbian Agricultural College, Yanbian Teachers College and the Yanbian Branch of the Jilin Institute of Arts. The new YBU thus has a normal college. In 1996, YBU was enlisted in the national Project 211 and in 2001 it was put on the list of key universities for the Western Development.5 In 2005, it was upgraded from a provincial institution to a national key university co-sponsored by the Ministry of Education and Jilin Province.

---

5 “Western Development” is a policy adopted by China to boost its less developed western regions. The policy covers 6 provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan), 5 autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang), 1 municipality (Chongqing), and 3 minority autonomous prefectures (Yanbian, Xiangxi, and Enshi).
**Special Characteristics: An Ethnic University with Multi-Cultural Qualities**

YBU is a comprehensive university with distinctive ethnic features. Since its establishment in 1949, it has been committed to cultivating Korean teachers, officials, technicians and other talent. YBU has positioned itself as a comprehensive teaching and research university. It focuses on undergraduate education yet still actively promotes postgraduate education. In disciplinary development, its policy is to strengthen basic subjects, to develop applied disciplines, to highlight its featured disciplines and to cultivate new interdisciplinary subjects. It is guided by the motto “based in Yanbian, serving the province, serving the nation and radiating outward to Northeast Asia.” It is committed to cultivating “a pool of talented people who are morally, intellectually, aesthetically and physically fully developed, and who have an innovative spirit, practical ability and cross-cultural qualities.”

**Development Strategies: To Cultivate Multiculturalism, to Take Advantage of State Policies, and to Give Priority to Its Featured Fields of Study**

The university has three development strategies. First, it is determined to highlight its unique characteristics, adhere to its strength in terms of dual languages of instruction, namely Korean and Mandarin, and cultivate multiculturalism. In the fields of North Korean Studies, South Korean Studies and Northeast Asia Studies 70% of the leading experts and researchers in China’s key universities graduated from YBU. Second, YBU is quick to take advantage of developmental opportunities related to major state policies, utilizing the preferential policies that the nation gives to higher education in minority and under developed regions, to gain support both in terms of policy and resources. This strategy reflects an interaction between its own need of self-development and existing state policies for higher education in minority ethnic regions. The third strategy involves making use of the university’s unique geographic location to develop. YBU is fully aware that it is located at the geographic frontier of China, and that despite its relatively disadvantaged position in the academic world, it enjoys the advantages of being at the junction of Northeast Asia, near the borders between China, Korea and Russia. Therefore, it gives priority to its featured fields of study, such as Korean Studies, Northeast Asia Studies, and Comparative Research into Chinese, North Korean, South Korean and Japanese Cultures.

**The Transformation of ECNU, SWU and YBU**

For ECNU, SWU and YBU, the transformation into comprehensive universities
is reflected in many ways, including enrollment expansion, experiences of merger, upgrading to become Project 211 or 985 universities, the internal restructuring of disciplines and colleges, improvements in faculty quality and diversification of sources of funding.

The Importance of the Environment in Each University’s Development Orientation

ECNU and SWU are situated in different environments. ECNU is located in Shanghai, where there are four “985” universities and nine “211” universities. Shanghai also enjoys significant higher education resources, with 36 four-year universities and another 36 two or three-year colleges. By contrast, SWU is located in Chongqing, where there are only two “211” universities, namely Chongqing University and SWU and a total of 15 four-year universities. There are also significant differences between the two cities in terms of the local economy, the level of educational development and demographics. Shanghai is one of China’s most developed and most international metropolitan areas in terms of its economy, society and culture. It has long had a competitive advantage in attracting a huge number of talented personnel and resources. Being in such a city, ECNU aims to develop into an internationally prestigious university. By contrast, Chongqing is located in the Southwest, a region with a relatively underdeveloped economy and a dense agricultural population. Being in such a city, SWU not only has to assume the role of a top university in the region, but also has to bear the pressures of higher education massification. YBU is located in Jilin Province, an old industrial base, but in a minority region populated heavily by the Korean minority. The local economy is equivalent to that of China’s less developed western provinces. Thus this university aims to cultivate high-quality intellectuals with multi-cultural capabilities so as to promote local economic development.

A comparison of these three major universities reveals some notable similarities and differences in the ways in which they have clarified a core mission for themselves. For example, ECNU’s goal is “to possess several first-class disciplines, develop inter-disciplinary strengths and become a world-renowned research university that leads Chinese teacher education.” SWU goal is “to establish a high-level comprehensive university with an emphasis on teacher education and agricultural education.” Finally, YBU’s goal is “to have an influence abroad, play an important domestic role, and become a high-level comprehensive university with clear minority characteristics.” In summary, creating and maintaining a “high quality” and “comprehensive” status are common goals of all three universities. However, ECNU and SWU both highlight their teacher education while YBU emphasizes its ethnic minority
education. ECNU also emphasizes research and international prestige.

**Joining National Key Higher Education Projects through Mergers**

Many differences exist between the merger experiences of ECNU and SWU. First, the ECNU merger might be seen as a homogenous group merger where a strong university took in three weaker institutions in the same field, and, greatly enhanced the quality of teacher education as a result. SWU, by contrast, was a heterogeneous merger, which produced a complementary union between two strong universities: Southwest Normal University and Southwest Agricultural University. After the merger, Southwest Normal University changed its orientation and extended its function beyond teacher education. Another noteworthy difference is that the ECNU merger took place before the massive expansion of higher education and thus this merger did not have a significant impact on the scale of admissions. By contrast, the SWU merger boosted the scale of admissions dramatically, resulting in a huge university with roughly 50,000 students enrolled. Furthermore, ECNU kept its name and its identity as a normal university after the merger, while Southwest Normal University and Southwest Agricultural University changed their names to “Southwestern University” after their merger. Additionally, the merger significantly upgraded the university and increased the funding available from national sources. Although the ECNU merger took place before it entered Project 211, its identity as a “normal” university later facilitated its joining of Project 985 in 2006.

Finally, the merger of ECNU was a “top-down” process, resulting largely from the initiative and push of the Shanghai Government. By contrast, the SWU merger was actually a “bottom-up” and institution-initiated amalgamation, with the two universities actively lobbying for government approval for their “marriage.”

The central government denied two proposals for a merger involving Southwest Normal University in 1995 and 1999. In 2005, under the support of the Chongqing government, Southwest Normal University finally obtained central government approval and joined Project 211 which reflected the dynamic interaction and compromise between the university, the local government, and the central government. Although YBU’s merger experience had a considerable affect on its development, SWU’s experience had a larger impact, resulting in the change of its name and its functions while it expanded in scale and gained substantial government support.

The merger experiences of ECNU and SWU reflected central government policy that did not allow normal universities to merge with comprehensive or poly-technical universities and forbade them to change their names in a way that
would lose their identity as normal universities. Therefore, ECNU had to merge with smaller teacher education colleges, and only joined Project 985 because of its identity as a normal university. The merger of Southwest Normal University and Southwest Agricultural University only happened after ten tortuous years of effort. Its final merger and name change reflected a compromise between the central government, the Chongqing local government, and the universities themselves. This compromise was based upon mutual agreement over the importance of cultivating more qualified human resources for local social and economic development.

**Comprehensiveness by Forming New Departments and Disciplines**

The three universities expanded their education departments and colleges after the mergers, but they also added many non-education departments and colleges to accomplish their goal of a transition to becoming comprehensive universities. ECNU built five education colleges and nineteen non-education colleges; SWU had a total of four education colleges and twenty-eight non-education colleges; and YBU had a Normal College and fourteen non-education colleges. Of the three universities, ECNU had the most comprehensive range of education colleges, covering special education, early childhood education, elementary and secondary education, adult education, and the formation of teachers and educational managers at all levels. They also have a wide range of research programs in education, psychology and management sciences.

The three universities expanded their discipline coverage through mergers, cross-disciplinary collaboration and the building of new disciplines on the basis of existing disciplines. ECNU has 9 major types of discipline, including philosophy, economics, law, education, literature, history, science, engineering, and management. It has 65 undergraduate programs, including 21 in various fields of education (32.3 %) and 44 in non-education fields (67.7 %). SWU has agriculture and medicine, in addition to the nine types of discipline offered by ECNU. It has 98 undergraduate programs, including 18 in various fields of education (18.4 %). YBU also has 11 major types of discipline, similar to SWU. Education has been recognized as a top-level key discipline for ECNU and is one of the best programs in the country. SWU only has curriculum and teaching on the regular list of national key disciplines.

Thus it can be easily seen that the disciplines of the three universities cover a wide and comprehensive range. It is particularly noteworthy that there are no substantial differences between these three cases and other national comprehensive universities in terms of disciplinary coverage and educational quality.
Adopting Different Admission Policies in Response to the Massification of Higher Education

As a result of government policies in 1999, higher education in China entered an era of explosive expansion. The expansion policy decided on in 1999 by the central government was a reflection of the national will at the beginning. After the massive expansion, however, the government wanted to control the speed and scale of the process of expansion in order to improve educational quality and decrease the pressures of graduate unemployment. However, the combination of the enthusiasm on the part of universities and the broad social demand for massification proved difficult for the government to control. Government policy, social demand, and higher education institutions together brought about the enormous expansion in China’s higher education.

The three universities examined in this article adopted different admission policies in response to the demand for higher education expansion. This reflects the distinctive and independent logic each brought to their decision-making. ECNU focused on expanding the scale of admissions for graduate students, while SWU and YBU significantly expanded the scale of admission for undergraduates, shouldering a primary responsibility for the massive expansion. ECNU had 5,318, 5,913, 9,913, and 12,526 undergraduate students in 1990, 1995, 2000, and 2005, respectively; the number of students in 2005 was roughly 2.5 times the number in 1990. The extent of the increase was modest and was a result of a gradual growth. Nevertheless, the number of graduate students increased much more substantially, from 1,088 in 1990 to 6,898 in 2005. The number of undergraduate students at SWU increased several times, from 6,040 and 6,070 in 1990 and 1995, to 11,996 and 38,689 in 2000 and 2005, respectively. The merger of Southwest Normal University and Southwest Agricultural University increased the number of undergraduate students to nearly 40,000 or 6.4 times that in 1990. In 2009 there was a dramatic increase in admissions for graduate students, with 4,000 admitted, alongside 9,600 undergraduates. YBU had only 1,939 and 1,890 undergraduates in 1990 and 1995, respectively, while due to the 1996 merger, this number increased to 8,451 in 2000 and 15,485 in 2005, 8 times the figure in 1990. The differences in emphasis on different levels of tertiary education are evident from the numbers of undergraduate and graduate students. The undergraduate/graduate ratios of ECNU, SWU, and YBU in 2005 were 1/0.58, 1/0.3, and 1/0.19, respectively.

During the massification of higher education in China, both SWU and YBU chose to expand enrollment and take responsibility for meeting the huge social demand. ECNU, by contrast, adopted a strategy of emphasizing graduate education while expanding its undergraduate scale at a much more moderate rate to promote educational quality and build a comprehensive university.
Teacher education is still the primary function of all three universities. ECNU admitted 1,000 teacher education undergraduates in 2008 with a total enrollment of 3,700 undergraduates majoring in teacher education—which constitutes a third of all undergraduate students. SWU admitted 2,945 and 2,980 education students in 2008 and 2009, respectively, accounting for one-third of the total undergraduate student enrollment. YBU had 2,225 teacher education undergraduates enrolled in 2005. In terms of overall size, the teacher education undergraduate enrollment at SWU was close to three times that of ECNU in 2008.

An Upgraded Faculty, with Increased Workload Pressures

As a result of the mergers, upgrades and the expansion of admission, the strength of the faculty contingent was also greatly improved. As shown in Table 1, the faculty profile and structure in the three universities continually improved from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECNU</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWU</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YBU</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECNU</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWU</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YBU</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWU</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YBU</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant lecturer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECNU</td>
<td>1,093</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWU</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YBU</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral degree holder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECNU</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWU</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YBU</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “–” means data not available.
1990 to 2005. The percentages of professors among all faculty members at ECNU, SWU, and YBU increased from 5.2 %, 3 %, and 3.9 % in 1990 to 20.2 %, 13.1 % and 16.4 % in 2005, respectively. At the same time, the proportion of assistant lecturers among all faculty members at ECNU, SWU, and YBU decreased from 38.2 %, 38.4 %, and 34.2 % in 1990 to 8.1 %, 25.7 %, and 20.7 % in 2005. The number of doctoral degree holders has also increased rapidly.

However, because the expansion of admissions was so rapid, faculty numbers were unable to increase at the same rate. This led to an increase in the student/faculty ratio, and an additional workload for the faculty, with greater teaching and research pressures. Between 1990 and 1995, the student/faculty ratio did not change significantly (see Table 2). From 2000–2005, however, the student/faculty ratio increased greatly, indicating that the expansion of admissions had a broad impact on all three universities. Furthermore, the teaching pressure and workload increased dramatically, especially at SWU. In addition, as ECNU, SWU and YBU were promoted to the status of Projects 985 and 211 universities, increasing demands were placed on the faculty to produce more research.

Table 2  Student/Faculty Ratio in ECNU, SWU, and YBU, 1990–2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Student/faculty ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECNU</td>
<td>4.2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWU</td>
<td>3.4:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YBU</td>
<td>3.9:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Student/faculty ratio = full-time student number/full-time faculty number.

Multiple Sources of Funding Resulting in Dependence on Both the Government and the Market

The funding sources of the three universities have become increasingly diversified, moving from a complete dependence on central government support in the 1990s to multiple funding sources. These funding sources include central government financial support, provincial government financial support, tuition fees, Project 985 or 211 funding, research funding from government sources, research funding from industrial sources, self income generation, alumni
donations, and support from enterprises or other social bodies. In 2005, tuition fees made up 10% and 17.6% of the funding at ECNU and SWU, respectively. In 2007, tuition fees made up 38.6% of the total revenue of YBU. YBU and SWU relied much more on tuition fees than ECNU because of ECNU belonging to Project 985 and enjoying much more investment from the central government and the Shanghai government. With the increase in local government investment, all three universities have clearer goals and strategies to serve local economic and social development. Although the central government declared that higher education institutions affiliated with the ministry should be under the joint management of central and local governments, local government actually takes the lead, while the central government exercises strict macro-control over the three universities through the policies that regulate Projects 985 and 211. There are significant differences in the financial capabilities of local governments, resulting in different levels of investment in local key universities. The ratio of block grant from the Shanghai government to that of the central government was 5:1 when ECNU joined Project 985, which resulted in 500 million yuan\(^6\) in special funding from the Shanghai government to ECNU in 2006. Other favorable policies and development platforms in addition to funding are also very important for the three universities; however, the policies and resource platforms that support university development are still under the direct control of the central government.

In securing various kinds of funding, normal universities are at a disadvantage compared with comprehensive universities, particularly with regard to research funding from industry, the collaboration among industry, learning and research, and alumni donations. The normal universities also face disadvantages in seeking to attract more applicants and increase tuition income due to the special character of and provisions for teacher education candidates.

**Three Transition Modes of Teacher-Education Universities and Their Determinants**

As resource-dependent organizations, universities must be in line with the needs of the nation, society and economy in their development. They must obtain resources from the government, society, alumni, and industry to maintain and expand their development. In the market economy, normal universities have had to engage in a fierce competition with other types of universities for students, faculty, and funding. The normal university, whether it has transitioned to a

---

\(^6\) As of July 28, 2010, the exchange rate is 1.00 yuan = 0.147478 US$. 

A university must adapt to the needs of social development and the structural adjustments of the higher education system. This must be done whether it chooses to accommodate mass access to the tertiary education sector (e.g., SWU, YBU) or to persist in an elite development pattern (e.g., ECNU, Beijing Normal University). A university must expand the space for its own independent action, improve the quality of education and enhance its capacity for scholarly leadership as it finds ways to obtain needed educational resources from the government and society. On the one hand, the establishment of the open teacher education system in China in the 1990s facilitated competition between comprehensive universities and normal universities with regard to teacher education. On the other hand, normal universities have tried to expand their disciplinary coverage and broaden their functions, establishing many non-teacher education programs, and seeking a transition to a more comprehensive curriculum.

ECNU, SWU, and YBU chose different modes of development in facing the challenge of mass higher education. ECNU brought in several lower level teacher education institutions in Shanghai, solidified its characteristics as a normal university, and brought about an integration of pre-service and in-service teacher education. It emphasized the creation of new interdisciplinary subject areas and aimed at the coordinated development of multiple disciplines. ECNU had no intention of expanding the scale of its undergraduate enrollment, instead focusing on strengthening graduate education and improving teaching and research quality in order to become a comprehensive research university with an international orientation. Although it is still a normal university in its title and identity, it focused on a substantive transformation through disciplinary integration, structural adjustment, enhancing the faculty profile and research capacity, the diversification of funding sources, and the internationalization of teaching and research. The rigorous control over its quantitative scale of expansion enabled ECNU to concentrate on improving its quality and ethos. The transformation of ECNU is an example of the integration of new functions and could be identified as a model of “substantive” transformation.

SWU chose to transition into a comprehensive university with agricultural and teacher education characteristics. It adapted to the needs of social and economic development in the southwest region and became a comprehensive university by adjusting its discipline structures through a large-scale expansion in the 1990s, followed by a merger in 2005, and its inclusion in Project 211. The comprehensive transformation of SWU relied on a merger between two strong entities, an expansion of scale, and a title change. This might be defined as a “formative” transformation into a comprehensive institution rather than a comprehensive university or has retained its teacher education identity.
substantive transformation that saw a fundamental integration of disciplines and improvement in teaching and research quality. The pressure to accommodate the hugely increased number of students has rendered it unable to allocate adequate resources to improve quality. The transformation of SWU is thus defined as a “formative” mode of transformation, characterized by external expansion and a change in form rather than internal integration.

YBU is located in northeast China. It successfully transformed itself into a comprehensive university by taking advantage of its location, maintaining its ethnic educational characteristics, and taking advantage of the favorable national policies for development in both northeastern and western China. As early as the end of the 1950s, YBU began a transformation towards becoming a comprehensive university, primarily educating teachers and other professionals of Korean minority background and focusing on integration among the multiple cultures of China, South Korea, North Korea, and Japan. During the past decades, its undergraduate education and research capacities have constantly improved.

Whether dealing with the pressures of market competition, guidance by national policies, or international trends for teacher education, normal universities are all developing more comprehensive profiles, which has led to a kind of “academic drift.” As a normal university transforms itself into a comprehensive university, the priority given to teacher education is easily lost especially with regard to resource allocation, as the university establishes many non-teacher education disciplines. At the same time, comprehensive universities are developing teacher education programs, resulting in a convergence between normal universities and comprehensive universities and possibly unhealthy competition. Worse yet, academic competition between normal universities and comprehensive universities is likely to weaken teacher education programs, resulting in a loss of teacher education resources. If a normal university loses its teacher education characteristics, then it relinquishes its important responsibility for leading the development of local, regional and even national elementary and secondary school education. For example, the University of Chicago closed down its College of Education in 1996, claiming that it did not make any positive contribution to the improvement of education in the locality. By contrast, Teachers College of Columbia University has played a leading role in teacher education. It has been able to balance high standards of scholarship with a genuine and sustained contribution to improving schools, curricula and teacher standards in the New York area, and nationally (Hayhoe & Li, 2010).

The transformation of normal universities into comprehensive universities inevitably results in the loss of some of their normal characteristics, as shown by the changes in many universities’ stated goals. When normal universities deviate from their original mission and defined role, they often experience an identity
crisis in the process of dealing with the pressures of market competition and the requirements of government policy. This leads to changes in some of their attributes and their convergence with comprehensive universities. This phenomenon is sometimes called isomorphism—although normal universities retain their identities and teacher education programs, they emulate comprehensive universities in disciplinary structure, developmental goals, teaching, faculty and research. There are three types of isomorphism: coercive isomorphism, mimetic isomorphism, and normative isomorphism (Levy, 1999). If the government requires a normal university to meet the scholarly standards of a comprehensive university, the normal university will actively imitate the comprehensive university, in what might be seen as a mixture of the three types of isomorphism. This will cause the normal university to converge with the comprehensive university. Some famous comprehensive universities such as Beijing University and Zhejiang University have their own colleges of education, which pursue teaching and research on teacher education and educational studies. These colleges compete with the normal universities in the fields of teacher education and education research. In the transformation of ECNU and SWU into comprehensive universities by the end of the twentieth century, we see that the changes of attributes of a university are part of a dynamic process of ongoing adaptation to socioeconomic development and national needs under the influences of both internal and external factors.

The transformation of normal universities is influenced by a combination of three forces. The first is the self-development motivation of the higher education institution itself, i.e., the disciplinary and organizational driving forces for survival and development. This includes disciplinary structure adjustment, faculty change, and reform in the managerial and organizational structure. The second force comes from the demand of socioeconomic development, which is manifest in the adjustment of disciplinary structure, the setting of admission and recruitment goals, and the establishment of development strategies for teaching, collaboration with industry in research and teaching, and an exchange of knowledge, resources, information, and personnel between the university and the external market. ECNU, SWU, and YBU all established new disciplines and departments based upon social demand. Mergers and expansion in admissions also reflected the driving force of social demand. The third force, national policy, was manifest in the form of control over the structure, distribution, scale, quality, standards and development goals of higher education institutions by the central and local governments.

Undoubtedly, national policies of higher education have driven the transformation and development of the three universities. These policies include Project 211 in 1995, Project 985 in 1998, the higher education expansion policy
in 1999, the enforcement of a policy of opening up teacher education in 1999, and the introduction of a fee-free policy for teacher education students at six national teacher education universities in 2007. ECNU’s merger in 1997–1998, its inclusion in Project 211 in 1996, and its inclusion in Project 985 in 2006 have become the landmarks of its development. Likewise, SWU’s merger and inclusion in Project 211 in 2005 also had a decisive impact on its transformation into a comprehensive university. YBU’s merger and inclusion in Project 211 in 2001 and its establishment as a key university in the Western Development plan were essential for its development. The impact of these policies, combined with the internal organizational logic and the socioeconomic development logic, had a profound effect on the transformation of these universities. The definitive power of national policy was clearly exhibited during the course of the mergers and the upgrade to “211” and “985” universities in all three cases. Because the authority for resource allocation, policy-making, and macro-control and supervision are in the hands of the government, a kind of national will continues to drive the development of these educational institutions.

The developmental capacity of the institutions themselves, the social demands they face, and the national will have combined to determine the mode of development of China’s normal universities. In different historical periods, different logics tend to interact with one another to determine the developmental direction, strategies and model of universities. The three forces mentioned above interacted with one another in specific historical and geographical environments, forming the developmental path for each university. Case studies are needed to reveal the process and pattern of interaction among the three types of logic and behavior within these institutions and the effects of this interaction on the development of normal universities. Diversification and differentiation of higher education institutions has been a common and effective way to deal with the massification of higher education in many countries. Both academia and policy makers should pay attention to the institutional convergence phenomenon in the process of China’s move to mass higher education and more in-depth studies of the relevant governmental policies and institutional environments are recommended.

Acknowledgements  I would like to thank Professor Ruth Hayhoe for her inspiring advice and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

References

Li, J., Lin, J., & Liu, Y. B. (in press). 西南大学: 建设一个多元文化身份的特高校 [Southwest University: Building a niche through a multicultural Identity]. In R. Hayhoe, J. Li, J. Lin, & Q. Zha (Eds.), Portraits of 21st century Chinese universities: In the move to mass higher education.