

FROM IDEALISM TO THE REALITY: A HISTORICAL REFLECTION ON THE “FALL” OF “2011 PLAN”

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Abstract

The "2011 Plan" is the first major reform project in higher education launched by the Chinese government in the 21st century. It is also the third strategic project in the field of education following "211 Project" and "985 Project" since the reform and opening up in 1978. In the hope of promoting the collaborative innovation among universities, research institutes, enterprises, local authorities and foreign research institutions to settle the strategic issues urgently needed by the country, forward-looking problems of scientific and technological cutting-edge areas and major public welfare affairs, the government has determined to implement the plan, trying to support the socioeconomic development transformation in an effective way. But the plan failed to achieve the success as what "211 Project" and "985 Project" could, only three years to be abolished. Because of the lack of official explanations and little discussion and research in the academic community, it was generally believed that the "fall" of the "2011 Plan" was attributed to the change in leadership of the Chinese government. In fact, the fatal flaws in the top-down design of the "2011 Plan" is the main cause of the failure. First, the objectives of the policy, being too utilitarian, deviated from the basic law of higher education development. Second, the mechanically copied organization model found difficulties getting practical collaboration. Third, unrealistic and anxious in the implementations, the operation once again fell into the trap of "movement-style cooperation". Last but not least, the rectifying mechanism was incomplete, constantly amplifying the institutional malpractice. After two unsuccessful attempts, the Chinese government couldn't but return to the reality from idealism abandoning the "2011 Plan" and starting the "Double First-rate" program, carried out the connotation construction of universities down to earth, striving to improve the level of talents cultivation, scientific research and social service.

Keywords: Collaborative innovation; Industry-university-research cooperation; Reform on institutional mechanisms; Double First-rate; Educational strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

"Institutions of Higher Learning Innovation Ability Enhancement", known as "2011 Plan" for short, is a strategic project set up on the basis of the speech made by President Hu Jintao at the Tsinghua University Centennial Celebration on April 24th, 2011, with reference to the "211 Project" and "985 Project". The "2011 Plan" is another important measure implemented by the Chinese government in the field of higher education which represents the will of the state. By vigorously promoting collaborative innovation, with the "2011 Collaborative Innovation Center" as a carrier, the plan tries to give a full play to the unique role of universities in sci-tech innovation and talents cultivation, and to promote a deep cooperation among universities, research institutes and enterprises in order that substantive results can be achieved in the key areas where the country needs them urgently, so as to support the transformation of the national economic and social development mode. The "2011 Plan" was implemented from 2012 in accordance with its planning program. A number of Collaborative Innovation Centers would be selected each year, with four years as a period of construction. From 2013 to 2017, according to the principle of selecting the best and the most important, about 80 "2011 Collaborative Innovation Centers" were identified in the frontiers of international science and the most pressing areas of national socioeconomic development. In 2013, the selection of the first 14 "2011 Collaborative Innovation Centers" was given a large coverage by the representatives of the domestic media such as CCTV, People's Daily and Xinhua. China's most influential television program - "News Broadcast" also delivered a special report on it. However, the "2011 Plan" was a flash in the pan, being implemented for only three years to be abolished. There has been no news about the second batch of "2011 Collaborative Innovation Center" candidates so far after their publicity. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance responsible for the work did not give any official explanations. Likewise, the major media also kept silent about that. Why did the Plan fall so abruptly without warning? And why did the government departments and the media carefully conceal mentioning this? There have been a lot of research results on the "2011 plan" in academia, but no papers or works were devoted to explore the reasons for the "fall" of the "2011 plan".

2. IDEALISTIC POLICY OBJECTIVES

The key purpose of the "2011 Plan" launched by the Chinese government in 2012 was to promote the collaborative innovation among universities, research institutes, enterprises, local authorities and foreign research institutions to settle the strategic issues urgently needed by the country, forward-looking problems of scientific and technological cutting-edge areas and major public welfare affairs, trying to provide an effective support of talents and technology for the transformation of the country's socioeconomic development mode which was already imperative at that time. 30 years of rapid development has seen an immoderate reliance on investment and export, such economic development mode has been proven to be unsustainable. Over the past three decades, China has become the largest resource-consuming country that depends much on minerals, fossil fuels and other raw materials. Since the outbreak of the global financial crisis, various problems concealed under the high-growth cover in China's economic and social development have been exposed. Although the Chinese government tried to revive the economy by increasing investment, it did not meet its expectations. The four trillion yuan stimulus package failed to prevent a sustained decline in economic growth, but led to a soaring price, especially in the housing sector, and a heavy burden on people's lives. At the same time, China had suffered a nationwide fog and haze that was far more austere than contaminated water and soil. Both China's top leaders and ordinary people are aware that such development mode at the expense of great consumption of resources and destruction of environment has come to a dead end. The transformation of economic and social development is imminent. But how? At this point, the innovation strategy of the developed countries had lighted up a way for China. After the global financial crisis, the United States put forward the "re-industrialization" strategy of developing advanced manufacturing through the industrial Internet. Germany was actively planning "industry 4.0" strategy, striving to control the commanding heights of the fourth industrial revolution through scientific and technological innovation. Obviously, it was absolutely impossible for China to overtake on the bend in the new wave of industrial revolution by continuing to rely on technology import or copycatting. Independent innovation was the only option. Universities, therefore, as the most intensive institutions of talents and knowledge, were highly expected by the Chinese government.

However, the actual situation of Chinese universities is not optimistic. Despite the fact that there were more than 2,000 public universities in China, and the number of SCI papers was next only to the United States, China still needed to purchase a heap of core technologies from other countries. Many manufacturing industries were still in the low-end OEM and copycatting stage. As universities and enterprises were hoeing their own potatoes, it was difficult for the latter to expect an effective helping hand from the former. After the

global financial crisis, the problem of serious separation of teaching and scientific research in universities from the actual needs of socioeconomic development had become a major obstacle to China's economic transformation. The Chinese government believed that the best way to break through this obstacle was collaborative innovation. It tried to break the institutional barriers between universities and other subjects, and promote the collaborative innovation among universities, enterprises, research institutes, local authorities and foreign research institutions through the implementation of "2011 plan", which could gather and cultivate a group of outstanding innovative talents and produce a number of significant achievements to settle the strategic issues urgently needed by the country, forward-looking problems of scientific and technological cutting-edge areas and major public welfare affairs, and then provide an effective support for the transformation of the country's socioeconomic development mode

3. A UTILITARIAN TOP-DOWN DESIGN

In order to make the "2011 plan" take effect as soon as possible, providing timely and strong talents and technology support for the transformation of the country's socioeconomic development mode which was already imperative at that time, the Chinese government broke through the traditional practice of "211 Project" and "985 Project" in the top-down design of this plan, and put forward new goals and new ideas.

3.1 Set The Overall Goal As "National Urgent Needs, The World First-class"

In 1995, the Chinese government formulated *Overall Construction Plan for 211 Project*, aiming to have about 100 universities and a number of key disciplines improve greatly in education quality, scientific research, management and school benefits, make significant progress in the reform of higher education especially management system, and become the bases for cultivating high-level talents and solving major problems in economic construction and social development. Among them, some of the key universities and disciplines were close to or already reaching the international advanced level of their counterparts. Most were expected to obviously improve the school conditions, make great achievements in talents cultivation and scientific research, meet the needs of regional and industry development, and stay at the domestic advanced level overall, playing a backbone and exemplary role. In 1999, the Chinese government started to implement the "985 Project", with the goal of striving to form a number of disciplines reaching the international advanced level around 2020, make a number of universities rank among the world's top universities, make the overall level and international influence of a batch of schools leap to a new step, becoming internationally renowned high-level research universities, and make a group of schools become the high-level research universities with distinctive characteristics. In 2012, the Opinions on the Implementation of Institutions of Higher Learning Innovation Ability Enhancement required universities to give full play to multi-disciplinary and multi-functional advantages and actively cooperate with domestic and foreign innovative forces to nurture the "2011 Collaborative Innovation Center", which was expected to be an academic plateau with international significant influence, an industrial generic technology research and development base, a leading position of regional innovation and development and a major community of cultural inheritance and innovation, supporting the construction of national innovation system. It can be seen that, compared with the "211 Project" and "985 Project", the "2011 Plan" not only aimed at a higher position, but also focused on solving the actual needs of the transformation of China's socioeconomic development mode.,

3.2 Establish The Basic Principles Which Were "Demand-oriented, Fully Open, Deep Integration, Innovation Leading"

The plan was not simply to raise the level of running a university, but focused on solving the strategic issues urgently needed by the country, forward-looking problems of scientific and technological cutting-edge areas and major public welfare affairs according to the great demand in the development of science and technology, economy and society. At the same time, the "2011 plan" broke through the limit of "identity" as "heroes do not ask the source", open to all the universities across the country. Even those who were not included in the "211 Project" and "985 Project" universities could also apply for participation in the program. In the first round of selection, the "Henan Food Crops Collaborative Innovation Center" led by Henan Agricultural University and the "Collaborative Innovation Center of Yangtze River Delta Region Green Pharmaceuticals" led by Zhejiang University of Technology were identified as "2011 Collaborative Innovation Centers". They were deemed as solid evidence. In addition, it emphasized the need for universities to carry out in-depth cooperation with other innovative forces, not only to speed up the disciplinary crossing and integration, but also to achieve resource sharing among universities, research institutes, enterprises, local authorities and other off-campus units and to improve the quality of talents cultivation and scientific research capacity simultaneously.

3.3. Take The Collaborative Innovation Centers As Implementation Carriers

The "211 Project" and "985 Project" were implemented with specific universities or disciplines as carriers. As the number of "211 Project" universities and "985 project" universities were only 115 and 39 respectively, most of the investment in the field of higher education was confined to a small area. The "985 project" universities also covered the "211 Project" universities, so they enjoyed double funding from the country. The "2011 plan" didn't follow the beaten track, but created a new term - "2011 Collaborative Innovation Center" as the implementation carrier. According to the idea of "2011 plan" designer, a "2011 Collaborative Innovation Center" should be an independent entity organization which was co-founded by one university as the lead unit, combining with its collaborative units such as other universities, research institutes, enterprises, local authorities and foreign research institutions. It was neither the subordinate institution of the lead unit nor the private property of any cooperative unit. Through the huge funding for the "2011 Collaborative Innovation Centers", the Chinese government wished to lead universities to break through the inherent development mode, to go out of the self-enclosed fence and actively carry out in-depth cooperation with other social organizations, and to construct a variety of collaborative innovation models adaptive to different demands, in order to truly realize the strategic integration of knowledge innovation, technological innovation and regional innovation, thus supporting the construction of national innovation system.

3.4. Focus On The Reform Of Institution And Mechanism

The "2011 plan", as a strategic program reflecting the will of the state, was not focusing on some kind of technical breakthroughs or short-term economic benefits. It stressed the establishment of a long-term mechanism for collaborative innovation, which would break through the internal mechanism barrier restricting the enhancement of universities' innovative ability, and break the institutional barriers between universities and other innovation subjects. By means of systematic reform, it tried to build a scientific and effective management system, a personnel management system based on performance, a talents cultivation mode combining teaching and research, an evaluation mechanism based on quality and contribution, a scientific research mode with sustainable creativity, and a resource allocation mode for gearing up disciplinary crossing and integration, so as to inspire a greater vitality of talent, capital, information and technology, thus promoting the transformation of the country's economic and social development mode.

4. THE ENFORCEMENT ANXIOUS FOR SUCCESS

On March 15, 2012, as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued *Opinions on Institutions of Higher Learning Innovation Ability Enhancement*, "Plan 2011" was given an official start. On May 4, the Ministries published the *Notice on Printing and Distributing the Implementation Plan of Institutions of Higher Learning Innovation Ability Enhancement*, and clarified the specific procedures.

A tide was caught following the Plan, as the title "Collaborative Innovation" had become a household name overnight though not many truly understood its meaning. Some of the universities didn't even figure out the basic requirement before they flocked out to build packs of centers. All would seize the opportunity of obtaining funds from the country. Some of the candidates, especially those who were not blessed being enlisted in the two projects, treated being approved as the only hope of standing out. Local governments, referring to the Plan, began the certification work at the provincial centers in haste. In some provinces with strong economy, they tended to imitate the national practice, following suit during the process of Project 211, with the number of the centers growing in a constant speed. What's worse, two third of the institutes under China Academy of Science, half of the key academies of the backbone industries and more than 60% of the large-sized enterprises had joined in the campaign.

In June 6, 2012, just a month later since the release of the Implementation Plan, the two Ministries issued the Notice on the Launch of Certification of Collaborative Innovation Centers of 2011 in 2012, asking China's universities to submit the application materials for certification ahead of September 25. Of course, not all could get the favor, as the notice said: the number of the certified of the year would be controlled under 35, among which the frontier, cultural and industry types should be less than 20, the regional ones at most 15. Applicants from each province should be no more than 2, while those affiliated to central ministries and commissions less than 1. Subordinate universities of Ministry of Education could be exempted from approval examination. On that account, only 167 centers won the honor.

Many centers were thrown together in that hasty four months. People found no substantial cooperation but porous application materials. The first trial had left only 35 applicants for the second defence, including 8 frontier centers, 6 cultural centers, 11 industrial and 10 region units. At the defence in the international conference center of China University of Geoscience from February 27 to 28, 2013, what had caught the eye

of the attending experts were: how were the organization and management system of the co-innovation center constructed, and what other new achievements had been made in the mechanism of personnel training, benefit distribution and human resource, compared to the present settings. Of the 35 candidates, 18 were knocked out and 17 were promised a field visit. By April 11, the leading panels of the Plan 2011 brought out the final winners – 14 centers were eventually crowned with the title.

The Ministry of Education threw a promotion meeting for Plan 2011 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, in July, 22, 2013. Li Weihong and Du Zhanyuan, Deputy Secretaries of the Ministry, gave a speech on the policy purpose, implementation and the future plans. Du stressed that the Plan was not for a short run, not one or two years of practice, but for the brighter, longer future. The attending representatives were invited to give a detail discussion on the draft of *Overall Development Plan of the Plan 2011*, in which they motivated a more vigorous cultivation work. The sole year between the activation and certification saw a prosperous achievement. Four laureates including Collaborative Innovation Center for Quantum Information and Quantum Frontiers, Center of Cooperative Innovation for Judicial Civilization, Aerospace Science and Technology Innovation Center, and Henan Food Crops Collaborative Innovation Center were invited to share their experiences. The year 2013 and 2014 were regarded as a critical stage from the initialization to the implementation. That meeting was expected to push forward a better construction of the Collaborative Innovation Center, managing to replace the Project 211 and Project 985 with the brand-new strategy.

Having jointly published *Construction and Development Plan of Collaborative Innovation Centers of 2011*, *Opinions on Policy Support of Collaborative Innovation Centers of 2011* and *Interim Procedures of Certification of Collaborative Innovation Centers of 2011*, the two ministries figured the plan into a systematic framework. The three proposals specified that: China would pick 80 centers in the fields of international science frontier and socioeconomic development, which was regarded as the most compelling field of the country to be explored, from 2013 to 2017; the Centers would be given policy and financial aids in the matriculation quota of postgraduate period, talent plan, overseas academic visit and research program application, etc. The funds acquired for each center were kept secret, but the annual appropriation was 30 million yuan for the cultural-inheritance centers, totaled 120 million yuan in four years; 50 million yuan for the other types, 200 million in quadrennium. The Plan had generally expanded its support further than the previous projects as for the gross funding.

5. AN INEVITABLE FAILURE

Despite the government's high hope, policy support and huge investment, the development of "the Collaborative Innovation Center of 2011" — the core of "Project 2011", has fallen short of people's expectation. The whole project had to stop after a three-year run. After the promulgation of such a promising plan, rumor had it that the abandonment of "Project 2011" was largely due to the shift in leadership. With no official explanation coupled with rare discussions, it has gained a certain amount of popularity in universities and the society. Yet I believe that the major cause has nothing to do with the leadership transition, but lies in the very flaws in the top-down design of the plan that produced an effect too far from the expectation. The government eventually had to give up and start all over again. The analysis of the cause can proceed from the following five aspects:

5.1. The Policy Intention, Being Too Utilitarian, Deviated from the Basic Law of the Development Of higher Education

According to the *Implementation Plan of Institutions of Higher Learning Innovation Ability Enhancement*, the "2011 Plan" set its overall goal as "national urgent needs, the world first-class", striving to build first-class collaborative innovation centers in the world to meet the country's urgent needs. Its key mission was to enhance the innovative capability of a university's talents, disciplines and scientific research by pushing forward mechanism reform in accordance with the country's major demands, with the support of collaborative innovation center and the safeguard of converged innovation resources and elements. It was obvious to see that the plan's first requirement for the universities was to meet the country's urgent needs. In other words, the country's significant demands determine the direction of the universities' future development. As is known to all, the development of higher education has its own law, and each university has its own concept and culture, but the major needs of the country vary with the development of the times. Devoting full efforts to the country's urgent needs, they will lose the independent spirit of academic pursuit and traditional cultural accumulation. In addition, many scientific discoveries and academic breakthroughs required a bit of luck sometimes, an entirely planned research in accordance with the "national urgent needs" may not achieve its goal. In fact, the universities and their teaching and research staff have always been willing to carry out collaborative innovation with research institutes and enterprises to meet the country's major needs, but they

simply don't have the ability to do so due to the restrictions in the regime. Public universities, though in the name of legal person, have limited freedom in their run, with most of the school-running resources in the grip of government department. As a consequence, few results can be produced within this limited space unless the government changes its administrative system, let alone a breakthrough as the plan's designers expected.

5.2. The Mechanically-copied Organization Mode Baffled Real Synergy

Although "2011 Plan" stands for the "Institutions of Higher Learning Innovation Ability Enhancement", its main mission was to push forward the collaborative innovation among universities, research institutes, enterprises, local governments and foreign research institutions. For this reason, the "2011 plan" designers coined a new thing - "2011 Collaborative Innovation Center" with reference to the collaborative innovation mode in developed countries, especially the I/UCRC (Industry/University Cooperative Research Centers) in the US, and made it the core carrier of "2011 Plan". Yet different from I/UCRC, most collaborative innovation centers were loose groups aiming to obtain government's fund, not R&D organizations formed naturally according to each partner's advantages and needs. The designers of the plan were hoping the leading university and its partners can perform well to address the major needs of the country, while they were only trying to win the fund by depicting a grand future with their words. The system not touched, universities in China are still accustomed to "waiting-relying-begging", practicing the same doctrine—"no money no efforts; but even with money, nothing can be promised". As much as the designers were aware of these inveterate drawbacks, their hands were tied by the management system, so they failed to change it from the source. There was nothing they could do but to copy mechanically the experience of NSF's funding for I/UCRC, with the traditional application replaced by identification. Only the top centers that have advanced management systems and yield substantial achievements addressing the country's urgent needs can be identified as "2011 Collaborative Innovation Centers" and given a grand financial support, just as a Chinese saying goes, "don't lose the falcon until you see the hare". In the gambling between "well said" and "well done", the rule makers who hold the capital should have taken the initiative, but they were forced into a passive position for being eager to see results. Finally, the identified "2011 Collaborative Innovation Centers" were still those that come up with a seemingly beautiful plan.

5.3. Being Impatient for a Quick Success So That the Operation Once Again Fell into the Trap of "Movement-style Cooperation"

The original goal of "2011 Plan" was to break the barriers between universities and other innovation subjects, and to push forward a deep cooperation among universities, research institutes, enterprises, local governments and foreign research institutions. Thus, the designers, having ditched the deeply-rooted thinking pattern of classifying universities, lowered the threshold of participation, allowing non "211 Project" and non "985 Project" universities to take the lead in carrying out collaborative innovation. In the meantime, the plan was implemented by a new method that consisted of organizing groups, qualification, guiding fund, third-party evaluation, competing, and independent development, instead of the traditional four steps (handing in application, assessment, sending funds, performance evaluation). The designers wished to use the national guiding fund as a lever to encourage more capital inflows to the collaborative innovation. However, this kind of collaborative innovation was just wishful thinking of the designers, ending up with nothing, for it was led by the government depending on administrative orders. Though many universities led the formation of collaborative innovation centers, their purpose was neither to collaborate nor to innovate, but to get the fund. Such practice was no secret during the implementation of "211 Project" and "985 Project", many universities from these two projects had even become masters. The only difference was that the prerequisite for the fund of these two projects was the collaboration and cross integration among faculties and disciplines inside campus, while that for the fund of "2011 Plan" was the universities' deep cooperation with off campus units. During the implementation of "211 Project" and "985 Project", many universities have been used to "movement-style collaboration" where they convened an arbitrary arrangement, and made a hodgepodge of disciplines, teams and teachers that have little to work with as if it were a powerful and long-term partnership. When the fund arrived, these so-called partners would share the cake as they agreed upon before they went separate ways. And the same thing happened after the "2011 Plan" was announced. Many universities were looking for partners in different industries across the country or even the world to form innovation centers so that their collaborative plan based on fabricated history would win the committee's trust and then the country's fund. As much as the designers knew about this, their impatience for success prevailed over the rules they should have insisted. It's only a month since the announcement that the first assessment started. In no way could it succeed as expected in such a short time.

5.4 The Correcting System Was Incomplete

According to the system design, the decision-making body should be a team co-founded by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance, and the office under the team's leadership was the actual organizer; the advisory committee consisting of experts from the government, universities, research institutes, enterprises and social groups was responsible for providing consultations and the third-party institutions should select evaluation experts, conduct the review, check the process routinely and evaluate by stage. Yet during the implementation of the plan, there was no effective supervisory body nor the correcting system, which coupled with their impatience for a quick success, have made their collective lies in the assessment selectively ignored by the organizers, who accredited those underdeveloped centers and funded them with a large sum. After the first assessment, it became obvious that there was a huge gap between the designers' ideas and the realities, and that the defect exposed in the organization and implementation cannot be corrected for lack of a supervisory body or system. As a result, such problems were aggravated during the second assessment, causing the failure of the whole project. Things could be different, if they had been corrected during the implementation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The reason why "2011 Plan", the first major reform item in higher education field this century, was abolished after merely a three-year run is not that the new leadership of the Chinese government intends to overturn the policies of the previous government, but fatal defect in the top-down design. If continued, the goal would in no way be achieved, and what's worse, there would be a huge squander of educational resources and loss of opportunities. The main objective of the project was to improve the innovative capability and competence of the country by encouraging concerted social efforts on innovation and therefore promoting the integrated development of the country's education, technology, economy, and cultural undertakings. Yet the designers didn't take widely the opinions from the society, making it only a demonstration of policy-makers' ideas, ignoring the actual demands from universities, research institutes, and enterprises. As a result, they fought for their own benefits. In addition, the objective as well as the mission arrangement of "2011 Plan" both emphasized the priority of meeting the country's urgent needs, regardless of the basic law of higher education's development and the contingency of scientific discoveries; they copied mechanically the collaborative mode between universities and industries from outside the country; and their impatience for success has made the designers selectively ignored the fabricated lies. The fatal defect was the lack of supervisory and correcting system in the design, which allowed the defects in the policy to be so magnified in actual operation that it divorced from the designers' original intention, depriving the total value of the whole project.

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