University rankings have been highly visible since the early 2000s. Nowadays, they cannot be evaded or escaped. In higher education, global rankings are frequently criticized and complained about strongly by both senior managers and ordinary academics. People even call rankings a monster. With an understanding that global university rankings could cause seriously negative effects, I have argued elsewhere that they are often shallow, distorted, and misleading (Yang, 2008). Here, however, I try to look at rankings from another perspective. I have found that few have fully realized the variegated effects of rankings on different higher education systems and institutions. Even fewer have looked at how different systems and their people have responded to global rankings differently. Are rankings all bad? Is the monster truly so scary? Or is it because we have jumped at shadows? Using China as an example, this paper attempts to illustrate briefly the need for a multiplicity of perspectives for assessing global university rankings.

First, a few basic facts about Shanghai ranking

Although in my teaching, I do not always strongly encourage my students to rely much on Wikipedia in their academic writing, here let me start this paper with a brief description of the Academic Ranking of World Universities by Wikipedia. I do this firstly because Wikipedia indeed provides some basic convenient information in very plain language. Secondly its view shows how the public, rather than scholars in the specialized field of higher education, see the issue. The very beginning reads as follows:

Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as Shanghai Ranking, is an annual publication of university rankings by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. The league table was originally compiled and issued by Shanghai Jiaotong University in 2003, the first global ranking with multifarious indicators, after which a board of international advisors was established to provide suggestions. The publication now comprises the world’s overall and subject league tables, alongside independent regional Greater China Ranking and Macedonian HEIs Ranking. ARWU is regarded as one of the three most influential and widely observed university measures, alongside QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education World University Rankings. It is praised for its objective methodology but draws some condemnation for undermining humanities and quality of instruction. (Retrieved 6/11/2015 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academic_Ranking_of_World_Universities)
A few notes need to be made to provide further details about the above description. Firstly, ARWU started in 2003. It was indeed the first ranking system that received widespread commentary, ahead of two others: the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education Rankings. This is important to note as this is something initiated by China and leading in the world.

Secondly, although appearing almost entirely Western, the ranking system was created to serve China’s purpose. The idea for the rankings was born in 1998, when Beijing decreed China needed several world-leading universities. The then Institute for Higher Education of Shanghai Jiaotong University conducted a research project to study strategies for China to build world-class universities. In order to achieve the goal, it is important and natural to understand what world-class means. Therefore, a number of indicators were created to see how much Chinese universities lagged behind. Such work gave rise to ARWU.

Thirdly, listing higher education institutions or their specific academic programs, departments and schools in an order determined by certain factors stated in China from the 1950s when the Chinese government designated some key institutions and divided higher education institutions into various categories under the jurisdiction of different ministries, provinces and municipalities. The practice was to enable the governments to fund and administer universities (Yang, 1998). It appears to be much more acceptable in a highly centralized system that stresses uniformity instead of diversity. Taking this into consideration, it would be much easier to understand how and why ARWU emerged.

Fourthly, since 2009, ARWU has been published and copyrighted by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. Previously it was in the name of the Institute for Higher Education which later changed into the Graduate School of Education of Shanghai Jiaotong University. While there were a variety of reasons for the change, a major one was to avoid political problems. Indeed, French minister for higher education travelled to Shanghai Jiaotong University to express France’s unhappiness about the rankings. The Norwegian and Danish education ministers also visited the rankers, to a great extent to express their discomfort about the rankings.

Finally, critics of ARWU often point at the lack of focus on teaching and the neglect of many regional universities that are not doing world-leading research. The Telegraph, for example, says in 2015 that “It is a remarkably stable list, relying on long-term factors such as the number of Nobel Prize-winners a university has produced, and number of articles published in Nature and Science journals. But with this narrow focus comes drawbacks. China’s priority was for its universities to ‘catch up’ on hard scientific research. So if you’re looking for raw research power, it’s the list for you. If you’re a humanities student, or more interested in teaching quality? Not so much.” While these true, it is fair to say that ARWU has always made it clear that it only measures international level research by major universities, and never claims to be relevant to the majority of higher education institutions in the world.

Second, a change to the frame of reference

Rankings are an effort to govern today’s global space of higher education. Dill (2011) has identified rankings as one of the primary modes of the governance of global higher education.
China’s higher education goes global now. Its drive to create world-class universities shows a change to the frame of reference in higher education reforms with a passionate embrace of international norms, especially at the top layer of China’s finest universities. Chinese universities once competed between themselves only without looking outward at their international peers for standards. Only in the last decade have the top Chinese universities embraced a larger international sense of themselves (Marginson, 2006). In today’s China, discussions of university reforms necessarily involve both the Chinese and the Western. China’s embrace of international standards is evidently expressed by its active participation in global rankings mainly at the institutional level. The participation also demonstrates China’s repositioning in the global community.

As the international popularity of the university ranking framework developed by the Shanghai Jiaotong University makes clear, Chinese universities are almost singularly focused on racing toward, rather than away from, the Western model as it aspires to match the technological superiority of the West. To the international observer, China’s universities appear to be moving toward and not away from the global norm of a university model. As its economy moves toward being the largest in the world, China’s ARWU moves toward becoming the most objective Western standard for classifying the research accomplishments of universities everywhere (Postiglione, 2015). While this shows China’s by far fairly successful proactive approach to internationalization on the one hand, incorporating the Chinese element remains a great challenge.

Third, operationalizing the world-class in order to catch up

Even if rankings are a monster, it could be tamed to serve good purposes. While many universities around the globe aim at world-class level, it is not always clear what the level actually means and how to operationalize their strategies. China has employed ranking systems as a set of benchmarks to define world-class universities and the methods for the pursuit of that status. How the Shanghai rankers measure academic quality offers a good example. Originally produced as a benchmark for gauging the international quality of China’s academic research output, ARWU defines world-class universities in terms of academic quality that lies in the ability of university faculty and researchers to produce and publish research, especially in the more technical and scientific fields. An overwhelming majority of its criteria used to measure academic quality are based on research output, peer citation and high-level recognition, particularly in the sciences, mathematics and related fields.

For good or ill, once the targets become clear, Chinese universities have then endeavored to move in the direction. By so doing, their efforts have paid off remarkably since the ranking started in 2003. The annual ranking results indicate the latest situations of how Chinese universities fare in the global arena. The numbers of Chinese universities in the ARWU top 500 have leapfrogged continuously for years from 8 in 2005 to 28 in 2013 and 32 in 2014 and 2015. While it seems the total number has plateaued at 32, a few Chinese flagship institutions have been moving upward continuously. China’s strategies have been so effective that ARWU has now received a great deal of international attention despite that it was originally intended for a domestic audience. It is expected to assist China’s higher education to establish its global reputation.
Fourth, changing the mindset

Global university rankings could be used to change some long-held mindsets for both those in dominant positions and those who aspire to move beyond marginality. According to Martin (2014),

When the first QS World University Rankings were published by The Times Higher Education Supplement in 2004, there was surprise - if not skepticism - that thirteen Asian universities were included in the top 100.” This is the observation of John O’Leary, one of the world’s most experienced university rankings publishers, who has the following tale to tell: “On a visit at that time to one of the UK’s leading universities, a senior professor told me it was simply not credible that several Asian universities were ranked more highly than his own. He was on the board of an academic journal which could demonstrate that American and British universities were so far ahead of the rest of the world that the exercise was worthless. “In 2014, the professor’s university is still not in the top 100 - unlike fifteen Asian universities - and few now believe that the West has natural, let alone permanent, superiority over the East in higher education and research. Indeed, many commentators have predicted an even more rapid rise by the well-funded institutions of China, Japan and other parts of Asia.

As Martin further notes, there has been a seismic shift in the balance of world education power. The Western mold of present and future domination in knowledge and learning is being broken well and truly. Many university leaders in Europe and North America, and Oceania openly express their concern that Asian universities may eventually dominate the rankings, and their interest in working with Asian peers.

On the other side, for long and arguably still to a great extent, East Asians have long had their idealization of Western universities. While global university rankings have shown the huge gap between East Asian and Western universities, the chasm is no longer perceived as impassible, at least by East Asia’s best higher institutions. This was repeatedly confirmed by my recent fieldwork interviews with senior university leaders on the Chinese mainland and in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. For example, one eminent social scientist with senior administrative role at the National University of Singapore remarked explicitly when I was talking about Australian universities with him: “Australian universities are no longer our frame of reference.”

Fifth: some final points

It is fair to criticize global university rankings. Yet critique should be done in a fair manner with relevance. This, however, is not the case in the literature at the moment. Niilo Kauppi and Tero Erkkilä (2011), for example, hold that the creation of rankings is in itself a political choice. Rankings are “tools of symbolic power” that reproduce dominant discourses about quality and attempt to represent an objective reality of higher education (p. 317). While they are right in reminding us that we need to be concerned with how rankings govern higher education and how they come to define what higher education is, Kauppi and Erkkilä tend to underestimate the confidence and creativity of many societies and peoples. For the rankers of ARWU and for many
high-performing universities in East Asia, what Kauppi and Erkkilä have said does not explain the realities. For East Asian higher education, the approach has been selective and strategic. It is widely agreed that in order to win it one has to be in it first. By so doing, East Asia has been achieving remarkably. On the basis of such progresses, East Asian higher education and institutions have more confidence in their development to become a game changer in the global arena of higher education.

This is not to say global rankings are harmless. Even if they have been working for some East Asian institutions especially in China, great risks remain. They could cause serious problems if East Asians do not pay sufficient attention to their socio-cultural needs and identities. Global rankings do not suit every system and each institution the same. They only serve some (usually national flagships and highly prestigious) well. For most regional institutions they are much less meaningful. While many complain about their negative impacts, people lack reflexivity on their responses to rankings. It is also important to differentiate various ranking systems. Even among the three globally most influential ones, ARWU says things more strongly than the other two in research and at the level of national power. It is interesting here to see how the Chinese treat the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education Rankings. Even the systems rank some Chinese institutions very highly and even China is keen to have its best universities in the global space, the Chinese have always played down the results. Therefore, I would rather see global rankings as a horse which, although running wild oftentimes, could be well used if safely controlled. We need more balanced views about global university rankings to better serve higher education development in East Asia. No need to jump at shadows.

References


