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**Abstract**

In this article, we examine how the concept of world-class universities has emerged in Chinese higher education at both the sectoral and institutional level. We examine policy decisions related to creating world-class universities on China's mainland and institutional responses to these policies. We then read these policies through "cultural scripts"—an analytic approach focused on visible and hidden cultural properties (Tan 2012, 2015) that may inform policy direction. First, we examine the intersection of Confucian values and Communist history in China as they relate to higher education. Second, we critically analyze the role of neoliberalism in higher education development worldwide and specifically in China. Third, we investigate utilitarianism as a feature of higher education in China. Finally, we draw critical conclusions about the emergence of world-class universities in China and their overall impact on the higher education sector there. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)