

GOVERNANCE IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

Wen Wen and Simon Marginson

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on governance in higher education in China. It sees that governance as distinctive on the world scale and the potential source of distinctiveness in other domains of higher education. By taking an historical approach, reviewing relevant literature and drawing on empirical research on governance at one leading research university, the paper discusses system organisation, government–university relations and the role of the Communist Party (CCP), centralisation and devolution, institutional leadership, interior governance, academic freedom and responsibility, and the relevance of collegial norms. It concludes that the party-state and Chinese higher education will need to find a Way in governance that leads into a fuller space for plural knowledges, ideas and approaches. This would advance both indigenous and global knowledge, so helping global society to also find its Way.

Keywords: Higher education; higher education system; governance; government higher education policy; regulation of higher education; China; university autonomy; academic freedom

University Collegiality and the Erosion of Faculty Authority
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INTRODUCTION

Is there or can there be a distinctive Chinese higher education? On one hand China has the oldest continuous higher education tradition in the world, if ‘continuous’ is interpreted broadly. The state academies that trained scholar-officials have been traced back as far as the Western Zhou dynasty (1047–772 BCE). On the other hand, when China began to build modern universities at the end of the Qing dynasty (1636–1912 CE), in terms of form they were transplants from the West. German, British, French and United States’ (US) prototypes left their mark. Japan was another influence. Later, after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949 Soviet Russian models of higher education and research were dominant for a time. Still later, in the global opening after 1977, US institutional models patterned reform and development, and the Shanghai ranking launched in 2003 ([Academic Ranking of World Universities \(ARWU\), 2023](#)) defined the ‘world-class university’ in terms of the norms of the Anglo-American science university.

China’s universities now excel in the ARWU ranking. One interpretation is that China does Western science very well. Yet China has a matchless scholarly heritage, and science and higher education grew more rapidly after the mid-1990s than they have ever done in a Western (Euro-American) country, indicating an indigenous dynamic ([Marginson, 2011](#)).

The East/West patterning is read in various ways. Mei Yiqi, an influential president of Tsinghua University, said in 1941 that ‘today’s Chinese higher education, tracing its origin, is actually imported from the West’. However, he added:

The system and the spirit are two different things. As far as the system is concerned, there is certainly no similar structures in the history of Chinese education. But as far as the spirit is concerned, the experience of civilized mankind is more or less the same, and there is a lot to share.

(‘今日中国之大学教育，溯其源流，实自西洋移植而来，顾制度为一事，而精神又为一事。就制度言，中国教育史中固不见有形式相似之组织，就精神言，则文明人类之经验大致相同，而事有可通者’。《大学一解》) ([Mei, 1941](#))

Moving in the other direction, today’s party-state in China calls for world-class universities with ‘Chinese characteristics’ ([Kirby, 2022](#)). This raises the question of what are those Chinese characteristics, and whether they are ancient, or modern, or both. For Rui Yang ([2022b](#)), a feature of Chinese culture is its capacity to take in multiple elements and develop new combinations. The practical reconciliation of diverse ideas, as distinct from the Euro-American habit of singular, universalising frameworks and methods, is itself a core Chinese cultural trait ([Hayhoe, 2011](#)). Yang sees Chinese universities as creatively fusing indigenous and Euro-American elements. In future this will enable them ‘to bring into the global community aspects of their rich educational and cultural heritage’ (R. Yang, [2022b](#), p. 117) – providing they fully engage with that heritage. Only when Chinese universities reach their own deep roots can they achieve luxuriant leaves ([Wang, 2004](#); [Yang, R. 2011b](#)).

The strands of East and West are each multiple and part of both the past and the present. China’s higher education is shaped by Chinese statecraft, Confucian self-cultivation in the home, and social relations both continuous and ever

changing (Wen, 2013), plus twentieth century Leninism which entered China from Russia, neoliberal modernisation and new public management, and state-driven internationalisation (Wen et al., 2023). The point is though that the reconciliation is China-determined. ‘The emphasis on agency and diversity is essential to understand the Chinese reinvention of tradition in a context of global modernity’ (Muhlhahn, 2019, p. 350).

This paper focuses on governance in higher education in China. It sees that governance as distinctive on the world scale and the potential source of distinctiveness in other domains, though that latter potential is yet to be fully realised. Governance takes into account culture and structure, and social relations and human behaviours that are affected by both (Bess, 1988). The paper discusses government–university relations and the role of the CCP, centralisation and devolution, institutional leadership, interior governance, academic freedom and responsibility, and the relevance of collegial norms. But first there is a prior question: *how* to understand and investigate higher education governance in China.

The Western-Centric Lens

The ‘West’ is a loaded, constructed, and debateable concept (Hall, 1992). There is internal diversity and differences among the West in terms of governance, autonomy and academic freedom. For example, in terms of university governance there exist at least four different models, Humboldt, Napoleon, US and UK, and there exist various traditions of and perceptions towards institutional autonomy and academic freedom. There have been historical variations and there are significant differences among countries. However, for many non-Western countries, the West is both hegemonic and threatening, powers that have created damage and inspire caution, as well as models that have left imprints and still need to be learnt from or collaborated with (Marginson & Xu, 2022). Westerners have also taken attitudes to China that have been similar, all positioning Western tradition as superior. It is in this sense that the West/non-West distinction is important and is applied in this paper.

In a comparison of 20 higher education systems, Shin and Kim (2018, pp. 232–233) establish three categories in relation to governance. The first is ‘collegial governance’ in which managers control finance and personnel while the faculty are supreme in other domains. This category includes only Japan, Taiwan and Finland. In the second group, ‘managerial governance’, managers are the main actors in decision-making but faculty exercise some influence. This includes the Anglophone and most European systems, Brazil and Argentina, and South Korea and Hong Kong SAR in East Asia. In the third category ‘bureaucratic governance’ is characterised by ‘strong managerial power with state influence and minimal influence from academics’ and ‘strong top-down decision-making patterns’. This group includes Mexico, Malaysia and China. But does context play any role in the comparison? Can all systems be validly arranged on a single grid on the basis of a fixed set of criteria? Is the role of government in higher education a constant differing only in quantity? Are grass-roots power and top-down decision-making power always zero-sum in relation to each other?

After two years in China from 1919 to 1921, the foremost Euro-American philosopher of education in the twentieth century, John Dewey, reached the conclusion that ‘China can be understood only in terms of the institutions and ideas which have been worked out in its own historical evolution’; and Chinese politics ‘has to be understood in terms of itself’, not translated into an ‘alien’ political classification ([Wang, 2007](#), p. 76). Harvard historian John Fairbank stated that ‘our first requirement, then, if we are to understand China, is to try to avoid imposing a European scale of judgment’ ([Fairbank & Goldman, 2006](#), p. 47). [Ka Ho Mok \(2021\)](#) comments that

the conceptual tools adopted from international literature with very different historical, institutional and political orientations would not be appropriate for analysing the unique state-education market and university relationships in China.

Harvard political scientist Elizabeth [Perry \(2020\)](#) may disagree. For her the fundamental explanatory categories are the Manichean US distinction between free democracy and authoritarianism. In this mode of thought egalitarian social democratic Finland is equivalent to plutocratic United States, where money controls both sides of the aisle, and the non-contestable polities are also of a type. Perry’s contribution is to modify the ideological assumption that higher education can only flourish under liberal democracy. She notes that ‘authoritarian’ regimes also foster higher education.

As in the imperial past, authoritarian rule in China today is buttressed by a pattern of educated acquiescence, with academia acceding to political compliance in exchange for the many benefits conferred on it by the state. (p. 1)

One sign of this ‘political compliance’ is that ‘faculty are urged to prepare policy papers for submission to party and government agencies’ (p. 15). In Perry’s eyes this function, seen as a virtuous public contribution in systems all over the world, takes on sinister implications when the receiving government is an ‘authoritarian’ communist party-state.

The term ‘authoritarian’ shuts down Perry’s obligation to look properly at governance in China. Instead she expands on her claim about ‘authoritarianism’, referring to Russia’s 5-in-100 programme for creating world-class universities, higher education in the Gulf States, and even cutting-edge technologies in North Korea (p. 18). The contexts, systems and outcomes are not the same as China. None have built higher education and science as China has done. But they are necessary to Perry’s argument, in which all non-contested polities occupy a lower-level twilight world where government is essentially Machiavellian and the whole faculty is craven and smitten by the Stockholm syndrome. The underlying assumption is that the further the distance between a given higher education system and the US system, the more the former must be in deficit. The narcissist framing indicates how the commentator positions herself. It also perpetuates the old unequal order. As [Muhlhahn \(2019\)](#) remarks: ‘Constructing and upholding difference between the Westerners and the Chinese, or between the centre and the periphery, has long been identified as a key tenet of colonial rule’ (p. 105).

The present paper is closer to Dewey and Fairbank than to Perry. Governance and faculty relations in China can be understood only by closely engaging in the historical context and the present specifics. Sweeping Western-centric norms will not be employed.

Essence of Higher Education

There is another aspect to the ‘how’ of understanding higher education governance which again invokes cross-cultural differences. Western analyses focus mostly on formal structures, less on culture and behaviour and still less on purposes. Discussing the governance of the country, ancient Chinese philosophers considered not the ‘regime’, the form of the political system, but the ‘Way’, the goal and operation of the political system which was the essence of political power. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods (770–221 BCE) scholars had different views – Confucianism valued the people, Legalism valued the emperor, Mohism universal love and Daoism noble souls – but all took the Way as the starting point for discussion. Even given monarchy as the political system, ideas and methods of governing the country, and the outcomes of governance, could be very different (Wang, 2012).

The same is true of contemporary higher education. The Western question is: ‘what is the model (idea) of the university?’ Daoism (道) asks the ontological question of ‘what is the nature of University?’, and believes that only by mastering the nature and the law of University could a university develop harmoniously with its outside environment. Confucianism asks axiological questions such as ‘what ideals, values, missions and goals should universities pursue?’ One answer is that: ‘The way of Great Learning lies in the enlightenment of brilliant virtues, the remoulding of people, and the pursuit of ultimate goodness’ (大学之道在明明德，在亲民，在止于至善，《大学》). Both Daosim and Confucianism questions are more reflexive and creative in relation to the nature of the university, and are useful in the West as well as in the East. There is something too fixed and would-be eternal about Newman’s (1852/1982) *Idea of a University*. All higher education has purposes that it is moving towards; it is not being but becoming as the Dao states. Continual self-conscious reform and improvement are part of every kind of modern university.

TRADITIONS OF GOVERNANCE

Margison and Considine (2000, p. 7) provide a definition of university governance that might apply in both East and West. It is concerned with the determination of values inside universities, their mission and purposes, patterns of authority and hierarchy, and the relations of universities as institutions to the different academic worlds within and the worlds of government, business and community without. However, despite the many resemblances between universities in the Euro-American and Chinese worlds, they are situated in political

cultures that are substantially different. This generates variations in the role of government in higher education, institutional autonomy and academic freedom (L. Yang, 2022a).

Western States and Higher Education

Western governance is rooted in divided powers and a limited state. Modern Euro-American society is divided between government-as-state, the seat of political authority; the economic market; public civil society; and the individual, who enjoys an ill-defined normative primacy. Within the state there is a further division between executive, legislature and judiciary. The authority of the law provides a binding coherence. The Euro-American state has a capacity for focused intervention but the boundary between the state and all other spheres is endemically contested, tense and unstable. The medieval university developed from the church in the space between the church and the city/state, becoming incorporated in its own right. It was another part of the division of powers, in a varying relation with the state that became its main funder: in some countries part of government and in others located between state and civil society, and everywhere with a partial and problematic autonomy.

As noted, from these starting points there have been significantly different Western (Euro-American) traditions in higher education. But one Western tradition has been especially impactful in the non-Western world. In the twentieth century, in which higher education moved into the mainstream of societies, the practices of universities in many countries were influenced by the US American ideology of a system-market in which executive-steered institutions raised part of their own revenues, and focused on their own growth, performance and status as measured by student demand, research outputs and social/economic links. In Clark's (1998) concept of the 'entrepreneurial university' the research and teaching institution is an active builder of organisational power, status and revenues through engagement with external stakeholders and markets, though it still rests on the epistemic capacity of the 'academic heartland'. Higher education became partly shaped by neoliberal and new public management reforms that imagined institutions as business firms. Summarising trends in higher education governance, Shattock (2014, p. 185) noted the common use of state steering from a distance via mechanisms including planning and targets, competition for funds, performance measures and accountability/audit. In those European systems where universities had been closely integrated with the state, there was part-separation, though the extent of devolution varied. In many systems the executive leadership on universities was more professionalised. More universal was the growth of administrative functions and the partial evacuation of the former faculty role in governance, especially in decisions on finance and priorities.

Berdahl et al. (1971) distinguish the 'substantive autonomy' of universities to determine their own goals and programmes from 'procedural autonomy' to determine how these are achieved. Neoliberal reform often enhances state control over the goals of higher education, while enhancing institutional capacity in procedural execution. At the same time mechanisms that micro-manage performance, such as research audits, cut into both forms of autonomy.

Roots of the Party-State in China

China's governance tradition is that of a comprehensive state, not divided powers and a limited liberal state. Government, politics and statecraft are customarily supreme over all other domains including the landowning aristocracy in Imperial times, merchants and the economy, the cities, the professions, the military and religion (Gernet, 2002; Zhao, 2015). The law in China is 'a tool of administration in general' and never independent of central state power. 'The idea of the separation of powers could not take root in the absence of the supremacy of the law' (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, pp. 185, 241). Unlimited dynastic states typically oscillate between periods of openness and grass-roots expression, and periods of tightening control and closure. In the CCP period these oscillations have been marked.

The comprehensive Sinic state was not invented by the CCP. The archetypal state, comprehensive and centralising, was that of the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) which first unified China territorially. The chief minister of the Qin, Li Si, wanted to 'make the state the sole source of education and truth'. The Warring States period had seen notable intellectual diversity, but privileging the comprehensive over the partial, Li 'identified all-encompassing truth with Qin-imposed unity' (Lewis, 2007, p. 208). The Qin standardised written language and measures. It also murdered non-conforming scholars and burned their works. Later generations of scholars rejected the Qin but the comprehensive state tradition and its characteristic blending of state and society, private and public, had been established.

Except during the Republic from 1911 to 1949 when Western forms were intermittently used, in China's long history there has been no discursive limit to the authority of the state and no rival authority is permitted (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, p. 28; Muhlhahn, 2019, p. 77). Potentially the state can freely surveil people's lives and intervene as it sees fit. Civil society in China has always been smaller than in the Euro-American polities, more closely managed and with only intermittent freedoms. The autonomy of cities and urban-based groups potentially threatens unity and order in the state (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, p. 257).

While this form of state is not formally contestable it incorporates a mechanism for downward accountability that dates from the Western Zhou dynasty (Zhao, 2015, pp. 52–55); less agentic than episodic elections but fostering an ongoing responsiveness. The emperor presided over *tianxia*, the world without border, on the basis of the mandate of heaven (*Tianming* 天命), which was understood as a supreme moral force. Over time *Tianming* came to be seen in terms of the welfare of human beings. 'The mandate was dependent on the ruler's ability to educate the people and to offer protection from human and natural harm'. If the emperor ceased to rule wisely or justly criticism and rebellion would follow (Muhlhahn, 2019, p. 38). This might signal the end of the dynasty. In the first three decades after 1949 the CCP's overriding objective was the creation of a socialist society. Following the famine induced by the Great Leap Forward and the destabilisation of the Cultural Revolution, which jeopardised the Party's claim to *Tianming*, 'the core mission of the CCP as a ruling party' became 'making China strong and prosperous' (p. 543), as in the

imperial polity. Growing opportunities in an expanding higher education system serve to align people's welfare and access to social and geographic mobility with national economic prosperity.

In addition to the comprehensive state, a second Chinese tradition that affects higher education governance is collectivism. China's culture has been shaped by Confucian notions (L. Yang, 2022a) in which hierarchy establishes order: elite control is seen to promote prosperity and harmony. This is accompanied by a collectivist culture in which relationships among people are based on reciprocal responsibilities and a consensual moral orientation. The older vertical collectivism was foundational to the early stage of socialist construction under the CCP in the 1950s. At first the higher education system and associated policy formulation were closely controlled by central government ministries and provincial governments with a top-down approach, and this kind of collectivism is still embedded in the culture of university governance. The slogans 'being red and professional' (又红又专) and 'being compliant and productive' (听话出活) are still used in Tsinghua University today.

The early Chinese communists were inspired more by Russian Leninism than Marxism. With its method of democratic centralism, in which all party members were committed to carrying out the agreed strategy and tactics, Leninism was especially effective as a mode of disciplined organisation focused on specific goals (Liebman, 1975). The early communists were also strong nationalists and saw in Leninism the means of creating a modern nation-state able to sustain national independence and development (Muhlhahn, 2019, pp. 256–257). In the outcome the post-1949 Leninist state has proven more potent than the imperial state. Whereas the active writ of the emperor traditionally stopped at the level of the village, in the first decade after 1949 the CCP began to establish itself at every level of society, so that society and government could scarcely be distinguished. 'The Party injected itself into local society, and interacted deeply within it'. This not only established one-party rule, it 'also produced a community of unprecedented social unity and stability' (p. 373). Party networks and governmental institutions are closely engaged, with leaders at each level often holding simultaneous appointments in both structures: hence the descriptor 'party-state' (p. 372).

For most of its history the party-state has exhibited 'resilience, flexibility and pragmatism' without compromising top-down central control (Lai, 2016, p. 301) or opening its internal decision-making to scrutiny. Approaches to governance are nuanced according to locality and social sector and are not fixed but continually evolving (Stromseth et al., 2017, p. 276). The party-state enables ad hoc local adjustment and from time to time, experimentation (Muhlhahn, 2019, p. 363). Local and provincial level officials mostly have discretion, while continuing to be accountable up the line. Keeping tabs on them is an ongoing issue and the party-state uses selective transparency and consultation, mobilising local populations in the scrutiny of policy implementation by lower-level officials. This leads 'simultaneously to improved governance and more effective one party rule' (Stromseth et al., 2017, p. 4).

Devolution and Dual Leadership

Selective devolution embedded within firmly maintained central control has a long history in China. While Leninism does not have a good worldwide track record as a stable mode of governance, it has flourished in China because it has become hybridised with traditional imperial statecraft with its wealth of historical lessons and methods of how to manage a large and diverse country in which grass-roots initiative is inevitable and necessary. For example, following the history of rebellion in the borderlands under the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) developed a localised political elite that was Academy trained and locally assigned by the centre of the state. Local officials depended on central support for career progression. ‘Localisation and the consolidation of unified imperial power appear to be positively correlated’ (Blockmans & De Weerdt, 2016, p. 311). This approach continued under the Ming (1368–1644 CE) and Qing dynasties and essentially is still in use.

In addition to centrally managed devolution, successive Imperial dynasties typically used dual structures of leadership, to pluralise the flow of information upward to the emperor and diminish the potential for concentrated power. Under the Qin emperor each territorial commandery was headed by a governor but there was an imperial inspector to watch the governor (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, p. 56). At the start of the Western Han the chancellor dominated the bureaucracy; by the end the supreme commander and the imperial counsellor had become equally important (Zhao, 2015, p. 287). In the Song dynasty a military complex operated alongside the civil administration. Each had different social origins and while the administrators tended to conservatism, the military officials were capable of arbitrary action (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, pp. 110–111). Under the Ming the palace eunuchs ran a shadow administration alongside and often in conflict with the civil service, which had different social and regional origins. Each informed on the other (Gernet, 2002, pp. 406–407). The non-Chinese Manchu Qing dynasty used dual appointments: ‘The formula was to have capable Chinese do the work and loyal Manchus check up on them’ (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, p. 148). Manchu governors-general were paired with Chinese governors. They ‘duplicated one another’s efforts and monitored one another’s adherence to central directives. A similar structure was found at lower levels of the bureaucracy’ (Muhlhahn, 2019, p. 45). Meanwhile, censors reported to the emperor on both sets of officials (Fairbank & Goldman, 2006, p. 149). By comparison the dual leadership of today’s Chinese universities, with party secretary alongside the president and an expectation of harmonious collaboration, is simpler. It is significant that the dual system has roots not only in the Leninist practice of political commissars as co-leaders with army commanders, but longstanding Chinese statecraft.

All of this suggests that the Sinic tradition of deep devolution and bottom-up initiative, located in a framework of top-down central control across heterogeneous sites, and with inbuilt checks and balances such as dual leadership structure and multiple administrative functions, provides important clues to the ‘Chinese characteristics’ that render today’s university governance as distinctive on the world scale. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, the late 1970s and

beyond, universities have exhibited advanced and growing levels of institutional and individual responsibility, and faculty have exercised freedom in research development and international relations – in most disciplines their scope for action is similar to that of their counterparts elsewhere – while targets are met, government policy objectives are achieved, and the party-state maintains stable political control. Devolution does not mean autonomy in the form of independence. While the brilliant Jixia Academy in the Warring States period was notable for its institutional independence and contending epistemic diversity (Hartnett, 2011) this was not the typical Chinese form of higher education. In China issues of university autonomy play out within the boundary of the comprehensive party-state rather than at the junction between state and civil society as in the Euro-American polities.

Higher Education and Statecraft

The role of education in statecraft grew with each successive dynasty, beginning with the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) that followed the Qin. The Han state joined Confucianism, the formation of people in virtuous conduct, to Legalism that embodied state power. Education and self-cultivation in Confucian virtue became necessary to political order and universities became the moral centre of society. The Han Confucian Master Dong Zhongshu stated:

In ancient times, when emperors ruled the country, they made education a top priority. Setting up higher learning institutions in the country for education, setting up schools in cities and towns for education, using benevolence to guide the people, encouraging the people with righteousness, and disciplining the people with etiquette. So although the punishment was light at that time, there was no violation of laws and regulations. This is because education has brought good customs and spirits.

(立大学以教于国，设庠序以化于邑，渐民以仁，摩民以谊，节民以礼，故其刑罚甚轻而禁不犯者，教化行而习俗美也。) (Ban, 2007, p. 563)

As supreme ruler, the emperor was both embodiment of knowledge and representative of virtue. With the growth and refinement of the Academy learning and the system of election of state officials, the notion of ‘being practical’ (经世致用) in the Confucian tradition was combined with the social sentiment of actively entering the world. This jointly bred the tradition of ‘learning to be excellent is to be an official’ (学而优则仕). This institutionalised the cooperation between academic power and administrative power still in evidence today.

Whereas the CCP began in 1921 by rejecting Confucianism as counter-modern, in the last three decades the party-state has positioned contemporary China as in continuity with the achievements of classical Chinese culture (Muhlhahn, 2019, pp. 543–544). Here Confucian education provides a formula for embedding the faculty and the student/graduate in the larger network of social relations. Confucianism refers to ‘cultivating one’s moral being first, and then cultivating one’s family together, then unifying the spiritual pursuit of the nation, and finally pacifying the world’ (修身、齐家、治国、平天下) (Zhu, 1996). The foundation of social order is the manner in which the relational and role-bearing Sinic

individual is nested in expanding concentric circles of social relations, from individual to family, to community or workplace, to the state and to *tianxia*. Tradition on one hand legitimates the intervention of government in academia, while on the other hand it also reproduces in individual scholars an ambition and desire to participate in public affairs and serve the state beyond academia.

In the late nineteenth century, with a growing number Chinese scholars returning from Western countries, certain Euro-American ideas of ‘academic freedom’, ‘institutional autonomy’ and ‘collegial relations’ began to be introduced to China, creating a new strand in higher education governance. For example, in 1912, when Cai Yuanpei (later president of Peking University) was the president of the Ministry of Education, he drafted and promulgated regulations that laid down the basic principle of ‘professor governing university’ for the Chinese university system, which may have been influenced by the Humboldtian model. The then president of Tsinghua, Mei Yiqi realised this principle by establishing policies that respected professors and their opinions. However, ‘professor governing university’ lacked cultural and social foundations. It encountered many practical difficulties, especially after the CCP took power in 1949, becoming replaced by the ‘system of president accountability’ and finally ‘president accountability under party secretary’s supervision’.

After the reform and opening up period began in the 1980s, China’s universities also were affected by Anglo-American ideas of neoliberalism and academic capitalism, including the development of corporate-style universities, partly raising their own finances, competition between institutions and between persons, and the administered performance management of faculty. Like other governments, the party-state found that these instruments facilitated global competition, modernisation, growth and the management of expectations and behaviours, while being malleable to purpose, enabling it to vary and nuance governance while enhancing its control. Neoliberalism also introduced new issues and problems, as will be discussed.

CHINESE GOVERNANCE TODAY: SYSTEM, INSTITUTION AND ACADEMIC LIFE

In the first period of CCP authority in the 1950s higher education was patterned by the Soviet model. Research was largely separated from teaching and degree programmes and located in academies dedicated to the purpose. Many universities were developed on specialist lines and placed under the control of the relevant ministries. The state assigned graduates to jobs. Governance was top-down, with negligible institutional autonomy and academic discretion. Then in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) the universities were turned upside down. They became highly politicised. Student selection and often, faculty appointment were on the basis of class orientation and political stance not intellectual merit. Nevertheless, at the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 higher education was still an elite activity in quantitative terms, enrolling 1 per cent of the school leaver age group ([World Bank, 2023](#)).

Reform and Opening Up

There is a long distance between that system in the 1950s–1970s and today's higher education in which 60 per cent of school leavers are enrolled, China is the world's largest producer of science, its top universities lead high citation papers in engineering, physical sciences and mathematics (Marginson, 2022), and graduates find their own jobs. In developing China's higher education the deep popular commitment to Confucian educational cultivation has become combined with focused state policies and an ever-growing level of national investment (Marginson, 2011). The key moment was the restoration of Deng Xiaoping to the party leadership in 1977 (Vogel, 2011). Deng took control of policy on higher education and science. He saw original science and technology in China as key to national advance in agriculture, industry and military affairs. He attacked a tendency in the party-state to advocate practical technicians at the expense of theory (p. 203), emphasising the need for research to achieve scientific breakthroughs (p. 201). It was essential, he stated, to depoliticise the universities, and to encourage their engagement with Euro-American and Japanese institutions in order to stimulate capacity building in China. Deng's 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' was applied in higher education and science as well as the economy. However, if local agents were to 'feel the stones' they had to be empowered and encouraged to do so.

Hence opening up the universities was accompanied by governance reforms that broke decisively from the Soviet model, drawing on the Sinic heritage of selective devolution within continued central control. Deng emphasised that faculty should be fostered and regulated rather than suppressed. 'Science had no class character; it could be used by all classes and all countries despite their different political and economic systems' (Vogel, 2011, p. 201). It was enough that scientists were loyal to the country and the party (p. 202).¹ In the universities he established a new distribution of authority in which state control was counter-balanced by scientific expertise in directing the work. This laid the basis for today's dual system of governance, with party secretaries alongside academic leaders at each level. At the same time, Deng's bottom line was always the maintenance of Party control. He supported the maximum devolution and democratisation consistent with that condition (p. 250).

Chinese returnees from US and European universities also played a crucial role in not only introducing curricula from Western universities but also introducing Western ideas in governance. Western governance models, especially from the US, also affected CCP administrative members through MBA programs in Chinese universities, which were usually delivered by returnees, and were further transmitted into party and government agencies through policies papers submitted by returnees (Lefébure, 2020). This Western influence in governance also favoured bottom-up institutional responsibility and faculty agency.

Deng's farsighted combination of bottom-up agency with top-down power and control was the basis of the exceptional development of higher education and science in China. Both parts of the mix were essential. Top-down control integrated higher education into the machinery of state so that it was lifted up by China's national trajectory and strengthened on an annual basis by growing

budgets. Bottom-up agency enabled development of the work of higher education in teaching/learning, scholarship and research. Scientists and other faculty were free to connect to international colleagues and encouraged to learn and share. Science in China expanded in conjunction with the rapid expansion of the global science network via the Internet which emerged in 1989. The ‘national/global synergy’ (Marginson, 2018) quickened both the growth of national capacity in science and technology and its global connectedness, bringing Chinese universities to the world. Within 30 years China became a first rank knowledge power. Both parts of Deng’s formula, top-down and bottom-up, were equally essential and if either one had been diminished the achievement would have been lost.

Deng’s devolution has been installed in three ways. First, in relations between national and provincial governments. Second, in relations between government and institutions. Third, in internal governance within institutions, in the intellectual freedoms of faculty.

National and Provincial Government

Many of the Soviet-style specialist universities under separate ministries were merged into comprehensives under the ministry of education; and while the top institutions have stayed under national control at that ministry, responsibility for many others was transferred to provincial governments. Transfer to the provinces began in 1958 (Wu & Li, 2019) but accelerated from the 1990s onwards. Whereas in 1996, 62 central ministry offices administered 366 higher education institutions, by 2006 the number of centrally run institutions had shrunk to 111, of which 73 were governed by the Ministry of Education (Shi & Wu, 2018, p. 59). The provinces were able to adjust development interventions so as to better meet local needs. They also found themselves carrying more of the costs. Here higher education reform intersected with the larger reform of the economic relation between the centre and the provinces in the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, including new tax sharing arrangements. China’s provinces now have more autonomy than those in the former Soviet system (Wu & Li, 2019) or in Russia today.

The central government assigns tasks to provinces by the means of administrative contracts and encourages local officials to perform on the basis of a championship-like promotion system. Economic performance targets are set by central government (Lai, 2016, p. 12). The higher education enrolment rate, one component of provincial government’s higher education development plans, is used as an evaluation criterion. Provincial universities have played the main role in expansion. Provincial universities/colleges increased from 759 (74.3 per cent of all institutions) in 1998 to 1,737 (93.6 per cent) in 2016. In 2016 they accommodated 93.2 per cent of college students in China.

Institutional Autonomy and Self-Mastery

The second kind of devolution has been the corporate reform of institutions. In 1985 the central government began to loosen its tight control over institutions and in 1993 it signalled a desire to step back from direct management. Institutions

gained more discretion in faculty recruitment (Li & Yang, 2014). The 1998 Law on Higher Education was a watershed moment, when universities gained the formal right to become a 'legal person'. In 2010 the Ministry of Education's '2020 Outline' enhanced the role of academic councils in disciplinary construction and academic evaluation (Shi & Wu, 2018, pp. 58–59). Governmental administrative powers that have been delegated to universities include teaching plans, curriculum development, infrastructure construction, and the purchase of equipment. Institutions also gained increased discretion in determining research priorities (Li & Yang, 2014, p. 44), though interviews by Tian and Liu (2020) indicated disagreement between government officials and university leaders on the extent of autonomy in research policy. The two universities with special national status, Tsinghua and Peking, have gained more operational autonomy than other institutions, including power over student selection.

As in all neoliberal system reforms, devolved responsibility has been accompanied by stepped up accountability and a part transfer downwards of fund raising. The Ministry began discipline rankings in 2002 and a five-year evaluation cycle in 2003 (Shen & Ma, 2018, pp. 146–147), the result of which was taken as the base for government funding distribution.

In recent years, there has been a sharp decline in the proportion of university income from government sources (Fig. 1). At Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiaotong University and Tongji University, the state provided less than 30 per cent in 2018 (Fig. 2). For Tsinghua, the percentage is 20 per cent today.

Surveying education policies over a 30-year period, Wen (2013) finds that the role of the party-state has moved from direct control to facilitation. Government has switched from being the major sponsor, provider and regulator, of higher education to being one of the sponsors, providers and regulators, but in the decentralisation of university governance and management it has maintained ultimate control (Shen & Ma, 2018; Wen, 2013; Zha, 2011).

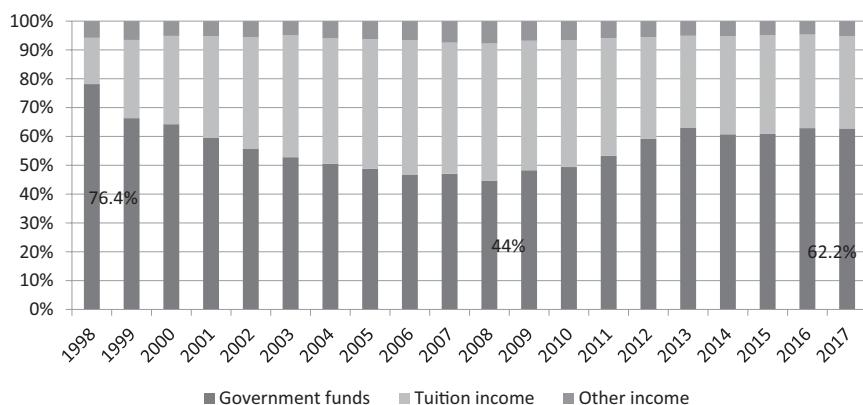


Fig. 1. Proportion of University Income by Source, 1998–2017.

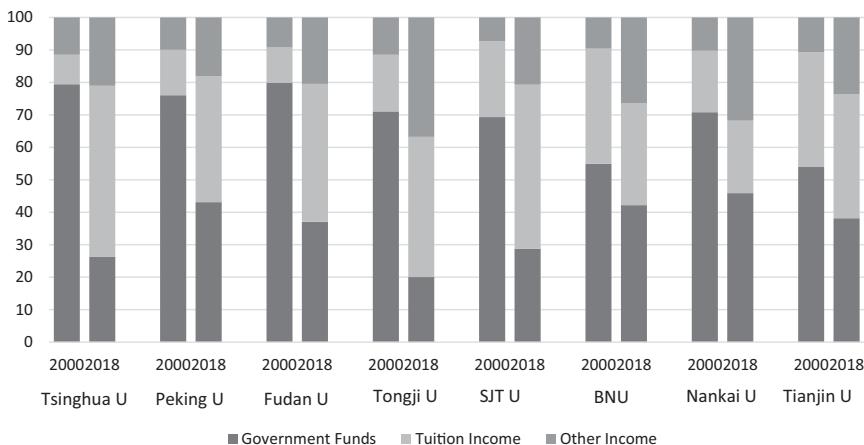


Fig. 2. Proportion of University Income by Source, 2000 and 2018, Eight Institutions.

In understanding these changes the question of interpretive lens is crucial. Through the Anglo-American lens, where the relation between state and universities is understood in zero-sum terms and institutional autonomy presupposes separation from the state, there has been little change in China. The universities are still firmly nested in the state. The Chinese lens identifies a substantial shift, from close and direct national control in the 1950s to a marked and arguably more Chinese devolution on the basis of regulated autonomy. There has been a parallel development in relation to academic freedom, though this varies by discipline.

Hayhoe (1996) states that the Anglo-American category of ‘institutional autonomy’ is inappropriate in the context of China which the legal potential for separation is absent. Government–university relation is more accurately defined in terms of *zizhu*, meaning ‘self-mastery’. Noting that under the presidential accountability system China’s institutions retain corporate and academic discretion, though supervised by the party-state through the presence of party secretaries in the leadership, Li (2016) refers to the *Zhong-Yong* model of self-mastery. ‘This model of governance is unusual in that it has incorporated some key values and norms of Western autonomy while simultaneously serving and promoting state interests’ (p. 10). University leaders and faculty have substantial scope for action in fulfilling their institutional roles. This constitutes procedural autonomy in the Western sense, states Li (2016, p. 12). Leaders and faculty can also become directly involved in CPP leadership on campus, ‘paralleling the traditional role of scholar-officials’ in China.

So long as the political vision and mission of higher education institutions is kept in line with the ideological interest and mandate of the CPP ... institutions can enjoy much freedom of self-mastery. Combined with political correctness that is defined by the CPP regime, this aspect of self-mastery may be described as ‘substantive autonomy’. Self-mastery as a core value and norm of university governance has created much space and dynamism for Chinese higher education institutions (Li, 2016, p. 12).

Not all commentators see Chinese self-mastery as equivalent to substantive autonomy (e.g. for [Li & Yang, \(2014, p. 28\)](#), the latter is narrowed by the neo-liberal reforms). Perhaps Chinese self-mastery and Western autonomy are best understood as incommensurate. But the point is that there is much scope for proactive positive action within the political parameters. While the top-down element has the last word, the bottom-up element does have agency.

The state is never wholly absent. China has used tuition charges and the selective growth of the private sector to share the cost of system expansion but [Mok \(2021\)](#) highlights the extent to which the neoliberal mechanisms are closely managed by the state. Market forces do not determine the quality and quantity of provision; and the degree of freedom exercised by non-state institutions rests on the degree of trust that they have established with state officials. Mok endorses the analysis of [Li \(2016\)](#). By conforming, universities in China ‘legitimise the state power to develop them as prioritised’ ([Mok, 2021, p. 8](#)). Thus the universities ‘are enabled to miraculously transform themselves in a short period of time and gradually become global leaders … though they may have to sacrifice autonomous freedom in some ways’ (p. 8).

Internal Governance

Euro-American universities exhibit a two-way structure in which administration is coupled with faculty. Executive leaders are primarily but not universally drawn from academic ranks. The length of their tenure, mode of selection and extent of their professionalisation vary. In parts of Europe and Japan executive leaders are elected and may have shorter tenure in post. Anglophone leaders are more likely to be appointed and share in the institution’s managerial culture. China is closer to Anglophone patterns than those of Europe and Japan, its academic leaders are normally trained and expert in the tasks of management, but with a variation. It exhibits a three-way structure with a Party section headed by the party secretary, an administrative section headed by the institutional president, and an academic section.

[Shi and Wu \(2018\)](#) describe internal governance in more detail. The Party section includes the institution’s party committee of senior administrative and Party leaders and connects to its analogues in each level of the institution, including schools, departments and administrative sections; teacher and student unions; and units such as the office for senior administrator selection and appointment, and the office for publicity. Successive structural reorganisations have strengthened the roles of the party committee and party secretary. The administrative section leads institutional operations. Under the president it includes the vice-presidents and heads of administrative divisions. The academic division comprises the faculty senate and the academic council. The size and roles of these bodies varies by institution, but the council normally includes central academic leaders and discipline-based deans. [Shi and Wu \(2018\)](#) note that the Party and administrative sections tend to overshadow the academic section, though some universities want to strengthen the academic section (p. 64).

[Shen and Ma \(2018\)](#) suggest that the academic bodies play a larger part in governance at Peking University than is the case at many other universities (p. 152).

However, the PKU Academic Board is less significant than the US Faculty Senates. It is ‘the consulting agency in academic affairs’ (p. 149). Its basic function is to approve discipline-level hiring and promotion. Professors have a larger role in schools and departments, especially in personnel matters, than in central university bodies. They lack the crucial ‘power to allocate funds and resources’ in the hands of the institution’s central administrative staff (p. 152).

An Example: Tsinghua University

At Tsinghua University there are similar organisational structures at each of the university and faculty (discipline) levels, such as academic committees, committees of tenured professors, degree evaluation committees, and teaching committees.

The academic committee has the highest authority. It decides, deliberates, evaluates and advises on academic affairs. The matters decided by the committee of tenured professors include faculty recruitment and promotion. The degree evaluation committee is concerned with the awarding of degrees; the teaching committee handles teaching and curriculum.

Fig. 3 uses the example of recruitment of faculty members at Tsinghua. The academic committee issues the recruitment announcement. The dean, department chair and party secretary make the initial screening of resumes. The selected candidates present their representative research, every tenured professor have a 30–60 minute conversation to the candidates, and then international peer review



Fig. 3. Faculty Recruitment Process in Chinese Universities: The Case of Tsinghua.

Source: Drawn by the first author.

is conducted. After all information is gathered, the dean or department chair report to the tenured professor committee, and the final result is submitted to the joint party and government meeting for further discussion and approval.

This governance structure contains centralisation and exhibits partial decentralisation. The centralised aspect mainly relates to administrative contexts. For example, the Party and Government Committee dictate the basic process of talent recruitment. The decentralised aspect mainly relates to the academic context. For example, the tenured professor committee exercises autonomy in disciplinary planning. Hence the academic community enjoys only partial autonomy in implementing decisions. Centralisation of power by the administration through the use of isomorphic structures between departments and the university, as here in personnel management, is a manifestation of democratic centralism in university governance.

The structures include both formal and informal arrangements. The formal structures are the standardised and institutionalised organisational bodies and their mechanisms, such as the academic committee and the joint meeting of the party and government. The informal structure contains everyday activities like the faculty luncheon and the afternoon tea meeting held by the dean and party secretary, which enable communication and interaction among faculty members and students and are an effective supplement to formal structures.

This description of structures does not fully capture behaviours, meaning the ways that faculty and administration conduct themselves in their respective roles. For example, in governance at the discipline-level the dean (department chair) and the party secretary, professors, assistant professors, postdocs, students, and administrative staff all have differing roles. The key roles are dean, party secretary and tenured professors. The party secretary is responsible for the ideological work of teachers and students, such as recruitment of party members and political study. The dean or department head is responsible for the guidance of academic development, allocating work to faculty members, human resources allocation, and setting the curriculum. In large schools or departments there may also be academic heads of sub-specialties, authorised to arrange teaching programs and other administrative work. In formal terms the academic council is the highest academic body, but in practice decision-making power in academic arrangements is exercised by the committee of tenured professors.

Dual Leadership Structure

Hence the university president and party secretary sit alongside each other and lead different offices and committees within the institution (Li & Yang, 2014, p. 33). There are overlaps in membership and numerous points at which communication is facilitated. The dual leadership structure runs throughout the institution. The party-state describes the prevailing system of governance as the ‘presidential accountability system under the leadership of the party committee’ (Shi & Wu, 2018, p. 64). The university president is vice-chair of the party committee and in that respect subordinated to the party secretary. Actual relations between the two vary from institution to institution but the formal terms the ultimate authority lies with the Party. Shen and Ma (2018, p. 149) state that an explicit division of

power between the president and the party secretary avoids power conflict, while joint meetings between the Party commission and the president-led administration have greater authority than meetings in the president's office. This continues the Sinic tradition in which the university is ultimately located within a state which never ceases to wield comprehensive responsibility.

Nevertheless, the administrative and academic heads of the institution and its units embody specialist knowledge and carry large and multiple responsibilities. Internal governance would be less than functional if the dual structure was vertical. Hence at the discipline-level at Tsinghua, the party secretary and dean are on equal footing with no prior power. The party's role is implicit, mostly to assist the dean to grasp the overall political direction. At a standing body called the 'joint meeting of the party and government', or 'the office of the party secretary and dean' the party secretary and dean inform each other of their recent work and build cooperation and mutual support for each other's activities. The joint party-administration meeting is the highest administrative body with decision-making power.

Both the party secretary and the president are appointed by the party-state though not always at the same time. In large research universities, operating within a system in which the institution is actively and continually networked into multiple parts of the party-state, both roles are very demanding. The particular mix of personalities and attributes, and the extent of each person's experience in the institution, helps to shape the division of labour. For example, a party secretary may focus primarily on external relations with government and party organs, and other stakeholders such as industry, while the university president manages administrative and academic affairs. Alternatively, an experienced party secretary who knows the institution well may take a role roughly akin to provost in the US universities, internally managing personnel and administration while the president builds world-class academic performance. A party secretary exercising effective relations within the party-state can foster trust and protect the institution from unwanted intervention, increasing its scope for action; or alternately may maintain firm surveillance and exercise external political control over the inner activities. Effective party secretaries probably do all of these things at different times.

Academic Freedom and Intellectual Freedom

Faculty conduct is always conditioned by the historical and social context ([Zha & Shen, 2018](#)). In the West with its tradition of a limited but powerful state, many issues play out in tension between the state and other agents. In China the role of the state is more ubiquitous, more taken for granted and less likely to be problematised at a given time. Academic agency is often understood as being expressed with and within the state, rather than being manifest outside or against the state. The various Euro-American ideas of academic freedom, such as the US notion of unconstrained expression of independent expertise specific to the discipline, and the French and German idea of freedom of faculty to organise their work, do exercise some influence but on the whole are 'not a good fit for China' ([Hayhoe, 2011](#), p. 17). Sinic relations between the scholar and the state are much older than the medieval university, the Enlightenment and American legal case law in relation to tenure and academic freedom.

[Fairbank and Goldman \(2006\)](#) remark that Confucian scholar-officials were close to state power but defenceless before it. ‘They had no power base of their own except as they remained loyal to the ruler or joined in factions formed by like-minded colleagues’ (p. 160). Yet they were expected to do more than carry out the will of the ruler. They were expected to ‘advise the ruler’ and ‘in time of need to remonstrate with him’ (p. 360). Under some dynasties the function of fearless criticism was structured into the imperial order. From time to time, notably under Tang Emperor Taizong (598–649 CE), officials named *jianguan* were expected to generate comments and criticisms of Imperial policy ([Zhao, 2000](#)). The *jianguan* were granted routine freedom of expression and protected from punishment ([Chen, 2001](#)).

Mencius interpreted the pleasure of learning and study in terms of a sense of self-satisfaction, *zide* (自得). Here *zide* was a realm of freedom. The pleasure of learning and study was the pleasure of self-restraint; only in this way could a person achieve spiritual emancipation, and reconcile personal freedom with the constraints of politics. By learning, succeeding in the Imperial examination and serving as an official, the scholar could reconcile and identify with the regime and was therefore freest to think and act. However, [Lee \(2012, p. 402\)](#) points out that the connotation of *zide* also underwent a transformation during the Ming dynasty. At a moment of national crisis, self-reflecting Chinese scholars understood that *zide* did not materialise independently of the state and society. The person-oriented clause ‘learning is for oneself’ took on social significance. As the saying went: ‘The rise and fall of *tianxia* is the responsibility of every person’. The moral self-sense of the scholar merged with the sense of responsibility for the world and the state. Thus, on the one hand, Chinese intellectuals were able to pursue the inner peace they longed for in the self-sufficient world of knowledge, and on the other hand, when the external reality deviated from their moral ideals, these intellectuals were obliged to revolt in the face of the secular ruling authority, making sacrifices when necessary. This deeply rooted Confucian thought still influences how today’s Chinese scholars perceive academic freedom, especially in social sciences and humanities.

The Sinic and Euro-American traditions agree on the inner freedom of the self. No faculty want to be told what to think. The differences are in the social expression of the self. Sinic scholars enjoy significant intellectual authority, more than that of their Anglo-American counterparts, derived from the historical status attached to success in examinations and the educational and civic responsibilities that they exercise. Freedom is understood primarily in terms of [Berlin’s \(1969\)](#) positive freedom rather than the negative freedom, freedom from constraint by the state that dominates Anglo-American ideas of academic freedom. Far from being solely theoretical, protected from the world, scholarship and research in China are expected to support action for the public good, if necessary ranging beyond the specialised field of knowledge. [Hayhoe \(2011\)](#) labels the more proactive concept ‘intellectual freedom’.

Hence there are differing limitations in the freedoms of each tradition. Euro-American faculty can express themselves openly in their field of expertise but

can be also ignored, critics on the sideline. Sinic faculty are more centrally positioned. What they say matters and they may have a larger intellectual canvas. However, while they have self-determination they do not have self-realisation. They must account for the effects of what they say, including the implications for the party-state. Hence they have a larger scope for free expression behind closed doors, inside the party-state, than in the public arena or perhaps the classroom. The clearest difference between the two traditions is in the nature of criticism of the regime. (Note that in the discussion in the West questions of academic/intellectual freedom often become confused with questions of political freedoms, as in relation to Hong Kong SAR. Though the Hong Kong democracy campaigns are located primarily in the universities their content is largely that of a political movement rather than a defence of academic freedom.) As noted, Sinic tradition does provide for open scholarly criticism when necessary and sees this as a moral duty.

Collegiality

There is no parallel term in Chinese for ‘collegiality’, with its double meaning of horizontal academic respect, grounded in epistemic identities, and also faculty (and primarily professorial) power in the running of the university. There is no Chinese tradition of independent discipline-based governance by faculty or professorial meetings with resource allocation power. The analogues used most frequently are ‘professor governance’ (教授治校、教授治学) and ‘college/department governance’ (院系治理). Elements of collegial culture were imported into the Westernising universities during the Republic, along with ideas of university autonomy and academic freedom, but vanished in the 1950s when higher education was remodelled along Soviet lines. Since the 1980s, as noted, the faculty element in governance has been formalised, though the scope for decision-making by the academic section on finance, resources and priorities is limited by the administrative and Party sections. Many faculty in China are engaged in discipline-based international networks. Perhaps it is there that flat relationships based on shared knowledge and academic agendas are most apparent. International relations are less bound by Sinic tradition, the state and local hierarchy, freeing scope for independent action.

Within China a quasi-collegial element is maximised in both formal and informal terms at the level of the discipline in teaching and research. It can be undercut by entrepreneurial faculty who pursue their self-interest in the marketplace, using the university and its reputation to build external business while minimising their obligations to and solidarity with their colleagues as well as to institutional management and culture. A parallel problem is that some professors of outstanding accomplishment seek to monopolise resources with limited concern for the co-development of the academic community. The potential for flat collaboration is also weakened by administration-oriented systems for valuing, assessing and organising faculty work that prioritise quantity metrics over intellectual content, and social and educational purpose, and set colleagues in competition with each other.

OBSTACLES AND LIMITS

Altbach (2016) and Kirby (2017, 2022) suggest that Chinese universities have an inflexible and ineffective governance system, itemising the role of the party-state. Altbach sees this as a ‘glass ceiling’, a limit on free thought and creativity. Kirby believes it might block China’s institutions from taking a world leading role in the twenty-first century. The implication is that if Chinese universities looked like US universities, all would be well. It is not so simple.

The party-state mode of organisation has proven adept in managing wide-spread devolution and selective grass-roots initiative and experimentation, while both sustaining exceptional rates of growth and performance improvement and managing risk. ‘Crossing the river and feeling the stones’ has proven an adept method. It is pushing scholarly credibility to breaking point to argue or imply that China’s success has occurred despite, rather than because of, its political system and mode of higher education governance (Marginson, 2022). In that respect Perry (2020) is more sophisticated, because her narrative renders China’s higher education performance compatible with the political system, though ultimately her account is no more explanatory because it stereotypes both higher education and the regime.

Within universities, an immediate concern about governance is the unclear division of power and responsibility between Party and administration. While the regulations provide for both the organisational power of the party to implement political leadership of universities, and the administrative authority exercised by the president, this hardly resolves the question ‘who has the most authority over university governance?’ The relationship can work well because the persons involved make it work but this is not always the case. In some colleges and universities the power and the boundaries are not at all clear. There are frequent conflicts, instances of multiple administration commands that contradict each other, and problems and responsibilities being evaded by passing them across the divide.

An equally important concern is the endemic weakness of the academic section. This is a crucial issue because it houses the agency of faculty, the essential bottom-up element in Deng Xiaoping’s formula for the growth of higher education and science. Observers agree that the academic component of governance is continuously threatened with displacement by the Party section and the administrative section, even in institutions such as Peking University where academic culture is relatively strong. ‘The administrative power dominates the academic power’ (Shi & Wu, 2018, p. 67). Long habits of collective compliance may reinforce this tendency among faculty. But why should teachers and students be motivated to participate in the present governance? Further, there is little collaboration across disciplinary boundaries because each discipline represents a separated silo of resources. Governance can be remade to strength the scope and authority of faculty assemblies at each level, and to encourage cooperation across disciplines, without sacrificing goals and coherence.

Other limitations derive from the application of neoliberal and new public management reforms in China. This plays out in both the internal and external domains of governance.

In internal governance, the prevailing evaluation culture is associated with tension between the quantity and quality of academic outcomes, and hence between administrative goals and academic standards. Rigid metrics and excessive demands for output reshape and limit the multidimensional value of academic activity, which again threatens to eat into the bottom-up capability of faculty to shape creative initiatives.

Externally, neoliberal systems are associated with a macro process of homogenisation, as in other countries. After three decades of reform and opening up, external governance has moved from a dual structure of ‘government–university’ to a triad of ‘government–university–market’ but governance is market-like rather than a market ([Zhang & Zhang, 2018](#)). The market competition mechanism, which is merely one of the means used by the state, as not freed up the institutions. The state, not decentralised market actors, is the sole source of performance accountability. In setting out to build world-class universities the government has applied resources to a limited group of universities and disciplines and measured their performance to determine whether they progress to the next funding round. A few universities have developed rapidly in a short period of time, but the process has installed a utilitarian orientation based on ranking and quantitative indexes. Homogenous evaluation does not distinguish between types of institutions. All universities compete for ranking to the neglect of their autonomous missions. Some colleges and universities deviate from talent cultivation by using research output as their sole assessment criterion ([Cao, 2019](#); [Yi, 2021](#)). Provinces tend to follow strategies of institutional isomorphism. Each has established its own ‘mini-985’ project and ‘mini-211’ project and made every effort to promote those universities to national recognition and world-class status. The use of a single evaluation criterion reduces the potential diversity, dynamism and innovation in building first-class universities. Worse, it places in question the essential purposes and missions of the universities. Is their Way to be defined and driven by university ranking agencies with their handful of thin criteria?

The use of homogeneous criteria for evaluation, including bibliometric data, have also entrenched the Western disciplines at the expense of epistemic innovation. China benefits from the absence of the characteristic Western (Platonic) split between pure ideas and applied knowledge, and from a tradition in which multiple and hybrid thought has bred continuous creativity and adaptations. But as noted, its modern disciplines and mode of knowledge organisation have been imported from the West. The uniform focus on global publication benchmarks tends to suppress knowledge that draws on Chinese rather than American-European meta-approaches, often reducing Chinese ‘indigenous’ papers to Chinese that have been interpreted through the lenses of Euro-American theories, methodologies and academic sensibilities. There is more work in national language in fields like social sciences and medicine (where Chinese scholars are under-represented in the English-language global literature), than is often realised. However, the disciplines have yet to be reworked as living Chinese tradition; and the project of uniting Western and Eastern epistemologies, though exciting and much discussed in abstract, is still embryonic in practice ([Wen et al., 2022](#)).

CONCLUSION

In his review of *The Chinese idea of a university* Rui Yang (2022b) states that ‘Chinese societies will never be fully Westernised, nor should they be. Many foundational differences between Chinese and Western cultural values make it impossible to fully assimilate each other’ (p. 126). Notwithstanding the fact that universities all over the world share common elements, Chinese and Western universities cannot become the same as each other. If they were, valuable diversity and some potential for unique contributions would be lost.

The governance structure of higher education in China is unique and instructive. It combines traditional dynastic statecraft with Leninist party-state organisation and selected but influential elements of the Euro-American university. Its structures often resemble Western models but its essence is its own and distinct. In making its Way forward it has worked with a potent combination of top-down policies and funding and bottom-up agency with freedom in global learning, with scope for initiative in ‘crossing the river by feeling the stones’ China’s higher education relies on the talents of teachers and researchers as well as university presidents and party secretaries. Trust between the party-state, university leaders and administrators, and faculty, is a precious resource and has been crucial to China.

The case of China shows that universities nested in the state can enhance their outcomes in some respects. Self-mastery and the positive freedom of faculty have been associated with exceptional growth and continuous improvements in quality. While top-down controls are not rarely wholly welcome there is agreement on essential purposes. Universities and faculty support the project of national rejuvenation that drives the party-state and believe in the potential for China to make a larger global contribution in future. This is a normative basis for the present system. However, if governance can be reformed to allow the universities to advance in the direction of larger bottom-up initiative and intellectual diversity, including the social sciences and humanities, their contribution to the nation and the world can be enlarged.

In the longer term the ability of the universities to teach and share with the Euro-American West, by developing new knowledge that combines Western science and social science with Chinese Confucian thought and understanding, while continuing to be open to and to learn from Euro-America, is key to the future world influence of Chinese universities. Chinese thought is ahead of the West in certain philosophical areas. It has overcome the theory/practice divide that dogs Euro-American universities and continually problematises their outputs; and Confucianism and Daoism embody a deep understanding of both the relations between man and nature, and relational human society in which the individual is always socially nested. If these starting points are to springboard a larger contribution, the party-state and Chinese higher education will need to find a Way in policy and governance that leads into a fuller space for plural knowledges, ideas and approaches. This would advance both indigenous and global knowledge, so helping global society to also find its Way.

NOTE

1. The full quote in Chinese is: ‘对于他们，只要不是反党反社会主义的，也要团结教育，发挥他们的专长，尊重他们的劳动，关心和热情帮助他们进步’.

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