Autonomy, Governance and the Chinese University 3.0: A *zhong–yong* Model from Comparative, Cultural and Contemporary Perspectives

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Abstract

This article builds on the ambiguous concept of the autonomy of universities with three historical turns in two dominant types of universities in the world – the Anglo-Saxon and American models, represented by the British and American institutions, and the Continental models, including the recently emerging Chinese University 3.0. Based on empirical data from two comparative case studies with a documentary analysis approach, I investigate the structure of the *zhong-yong* model of self-mastery, demonstrating how it may differ from the Western models and offering cultural interpretations for these nuances. The article concludes that self-mastery in the Chinese context provides an additional form of autonomy which is rooted in the pragmatic Confucian concept of *zhong-yong*. It is also found that through the pragmatism of self-mastery, the *zhong-yong* model enables Chinese universities to directly serve the state and, at the same time, to legitimate the priority given to their development by state power, thus creating abundant space and resources for them to fully unfold their potentialities. With multilayered and multidirectional power relationships, this model of governance has enabled Chinese universities to radically transform themselves in a short period of time and will allow them to eventually become global leaders, although they may have to sacrifice autonomous freedom in some ways.

Keywords: autonomy; self-mastery; academic freedom; university governance; Chinese University 3.0; Chiniversity; *zhong–yong* model; higher education leadership; improvement; development

"Autonomy", said the Minister for Research and Higher Education, "does not mean total liberty, for indeed there are as many forms of autonomy as there are facets in the life of the university."[1]

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1 "France: projet de loi sur l'enseignement supérieur." *Council of Europe Newsletter* 1986(3), 14, as cited in Neave 1988, 31.

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In recent decades, the concept of a Chinese University 3.0 has emerged as Chinese universities have dramatically accelerated their pace of revival, improvement and further development, drawing increasing attention from around the globe.[2] Leaders, policymakers and other stakeholders in the field of higher education are puzzled by what institutional characteristics Chinese universities have, compared with those in the rest of the world, and whether Chinese universities are uniquely Chinese or follow a dominant Western model.

Philip Altbach claims that Asian universities are all Western in terms of their basic model and organizational structure but also admits that China is exceptional in the sense that the country has endeavoured to break dramatically with Western academic structures.[3] Ruth Hayhoe contends that China has developed a different university model which distinguishes itself from the rest according to two institutional footings: self-mastery (*zizhu* 自主) versus autonomy (*zizhi* 自治),[4] and intellectual freedom (*sixiang ziyou* 思想自由) versus academic freedom (*xueshu ziyou* 学术自由).[5] More recently, I have termed this model the Chinese University 3.0, or Chiniversity. This model began life roughly in the late 1990s and is fundamentally distinct from its earlier forms. Its four core characteristics are: self-mastery; intellectual freedom; having a humanist mission (*zhixing* 知行); and institutional diversity (*he'erbutong* 和而不同).[6] These discussions have evolved from global, historical and cultural perspectives.[7]

This study builds on university autonomy in the global context of two dominant types of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the world – the Anglo-Saxon and American models, as represented by British and North American universities, and the continental models, as represented by French and German institutions and, now, the emerging Chinese University 3.0. Using historical discourse analysis and empirical data collected from comparative case studies, I investigate the Chinese concept of self-mastery and demonstrate how it may be seen to differ from the Western models, offering comparative, cultural and contemporary interpretations for commonalities and differences.

2 Li 2012; 2016a.

3 Altbach 1989, 22.

4 The two terms are sometimes interchangeably used in Chinese context, but differ from each other fundamentally in that *zizhu* always denotes the (relative) self-management of an institution designated and thus limited by a larger or environmental system, whereas *zizhi* refers to the (absolute) self-governance which allows institutional changes decided freely by the institution itself without any external intervention. In reality, a *zizhi* status does not necessarily mean absolute self-governance, as demonstrated politically by the five minority autonomous regions across China.

5 In German and other European higher education systems, academic freedom is traditionally associated with purely academic knowledge and often confined to theoretical or specialist disciplinary boundaries of knowledge exploration with little engagement in political activism. Interestingly, intellectual freedom in the Chinese context has always favoured applied knowledge in social actions including political activism, as has historically been practised by Chinese scholars. A recent, excellent example of such an application can be seen in Fang Fang's (2020) work chronicling the outbreak of Covid-19 in China. See Hayhoe 1994; 1996; Hayhoe and Liu 2010; Li 2012.

6 Li 2012; 2016a.

7 See, e.g., Altbach 1992; Hayhoe 1994; Li 2012; 2016a; Li and Hayhoe 2012; Zha, Shi and Wang 2016, among others.

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Analytic Framework and Data Sources

There has been much discussion about the ambiguous term "autonomy," especially as it "is contextually and politically defined."[8] Autonomy is both a historical and a contemporary concept and is subject to constant change. It is of global concern not only to university leaders, administrators, faculty members and students but also to policy players, researchers and the general public. Broadly speaking, autonomy simply refers to the independence or self-governance of an individual or organization, central to which is the "power to govern without outside controls."[9] Together with academic freedom, autonomy is often seen as a prior condition to the full functioning of university governance.

To many, universities are organizations that survive and develop in their own right, thus organizational theories on institutional development are taken as the analytic framework for this study. From an institutional point of view, Eric Ashby proposes some essential "ingredients" of university autonomy. Among these are the freedoms to select staff and students and determine the conditions under which they remain in the university; to design curriculum content and degree standards; and to allocate funds (within the amounts available) across different categories of expenditures.[10]

Robert Berdahl differentiates university autonomy according to dichotomous aspects, i.e. substantive and procedural.[11] Substantive autonomy is the power of the university in its corporate form to determine its own goals and programmes – the *what* of academe. On the other hand, procedural autonomy is the power of the university in its corporate form to determine the means by which its goals and programmes will be pursued – the *how* of academe.[12] Substantive autonomy stipulates the functioning nature and fundamentals of self-governance free of external intervention from an ethical demand offered from Kant's categorical imperative.[13] Originally relying on the legal concept of procedural law, procedural autonomy is the exercise of substantive autonomy in the sense of the operational structure, policies, mechanism and other routines of a university. These classical views reflect other earlier contemplations on university autonomy, including what Burton Clark termed the "triangle of coordination" between state authority, market forces and academic oligarchy.[14] Here, I apply Berdahl's binary ethical dimensions to examine the autonomy and governance of the Chinese University 3.0.

For the current study, I use data drawn from three types of sources in complementary ways. The first source is evidence documented in historical sources,[15] in

8 Neave 1988, 31.
9 Berdahl 1990, 171; UNESCO 1992, 19.
10 Ashby 1966, 296.
11 Berdahl 1971.
12 Berdahl 1990, 172.
13 Kant 1895.
14 Clark 1979.
15 Haskins 1923; Hayhoe 1996; Jaeger 1994; Paulson 1894; Rashdall 1895a; 1895b.

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addition to related Western and Chinese classics. The second is mainly first-hand empirical data collected on the massification and internationalization of Chinese universities during multiple field trips, mainly in China, between 2006 and 2019. These data were obtained through formal or informal meetings, interviews and observations with those involved in higher education development. Finally, I draw on data collected from publicly accessible documents regarding governmental policies, legislation or individual institutions in China.

Autonomy in the Western Context

University autonomy is deeply embedded in the Christian tradition that has distanced itself, by law, from secular governments from the very beginning.[16] The fact that the term "university" originally meant merely a number, a plurality, an aggregate of persons, provides evidence that autonomy exhibits the extent to which a scholarly guild of masters and students could govern universities themselves, protected by Catholic papal charters of foundation for the universities.[17]

The Western tradition of autonomy has been never absolute[18] and, in a legal sense, it was not fully realized in history nor in varied European contexts. The University of Oxford was created as a free corporation on an ecclesiastical basis, but the Bishop of Oxford at times intervened on academic matters. The Chancellor was in fact the Bishop's officer, with only the authority given and delegated to him by the Bishop who, in 1258, objected to all manifestations of university autonomy.[19] The ancient French universities moved in the other direction, being completely abolished by Napoleon in the late 18th century after the French Revolution had wiped out almost all the old institutions. All HEIs then became state agencies and instructors became government officials. The tradition of university autonomy was not retained and all universities are subordinate to the state.[20] Interestingly, German universities offer a nuanced case in the middle ground between the British and French models.[21] Like French institutions, German universities are state agencies, founded and administrated by the state and subject to state control. Yet, the German university has preserved its traditional status as a corporate organization, still possessing to a certain degree the right of self-governance.[22] These observations are supported by a recent study conducted by the European University Association.[23]

From a historical point of view, university autonomy has experienced three historical turns in the Western context, all associated with changes in the functioning use of knowledge, i.e. how knowledge is perceived so that it meets secular and

16 Haskins 1923; Jaeger 1994; Rashdall 1895a.
17 Nelissen 1998.
18 Brubacher 1982, 30; Hetherington 1965, 28.
19 Rashdall 1895b, 418–421.
20 Neave 1988; Paulson 1894.
21 Paulson 1894.
22 Ibid., 1–6.
23 Estermann and Nokkala 2009.

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societal needs. The first, elite turn occurred when knowledge was no longer viewed as purely religious, natural or ethical truth, as it was recognized that knowledge could be instrumental and function for political purposes in a national context. It was at this juncture that the nation states challenged the scholarly guilds, which gave a high status to theology, and took over the internal governance of such communities.[24] Guy Neave and Frans van Vught observe that government interest in higher education in the West is by no means a new thing.[25] However, in terms of serving such a governmental demand, Western universities are comparative late comers: Chinese universities were born two thousand years ago to serve as instrumental institutes designed almost solely for the purpose of training government officers.[26]

The second, industrial turn took place alongside the expansion of capitalism worldwide in the wake of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th and early 20th centuries. At this time, knowledge was viewed not just as religion, ethics or nature-focused nor for its political functioning. Instead, it was given economic values in terms of individual, collective or national survival and development. This stage saw enrolment expansion and also a change in university autonomy as the latter came under the dual threats of both political and economic interventions, i.e. both visible and invisible hands in university governance. Both individual and national interests have gradually eroded the primacy of the principle of university autonomy although it is still widely recognized as a foundational value and norm for universities.

The latest, democratic turn has largely emerged in recent decades, and is still ongoing, accompanying the global, massive democratization of higher education against a background of digitalization, decentralization and internationalization. In this current stage, university autonomy has been eroded to the largest degree in history, and continues to be undermined by multiple forces, especially online technologies, financial limitations and the pervasive commercialization and globalization of higher education.[27] The latest turn is probably the most significant among the three historical changes in university autonomy, and has led some to question whether complete autonomy is necessarily desirable.[28] In fact, it is the erosion of university autonomy that has led Conrad Russell to lament that there are no longer any institutions that could unreservedly be called universities.[29]

Autonomy in the Chinese Tradition

Very few institutions in China have enjoyed autonomy in the Western, legal sense, although there have been a few exceptions in history. There is, however, an equivalent concept of self-mastery in Chinese HEIs, the development of which may be

24 Rashdall 1895a; 1895b.
25 Neave and van Vught 1991, 239.
26 Li 2016a.
27 See, e.g., Curaj, Deca and Pricopie 2018, 3–4; Nybom 2008, 134.
28 Brook 1996.
29 Russell 1993.

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similarly divided into three historical stages: the Chinese University 1.0 (CU1.0, roughly from the 12th to 8th centuries BCE to the late 19th century), the Chinese University 2.0 (CU2.0, roughly from the late 19th century to the late 1990s) and the emerging Chinese University 3.0 (CU3.0, roughly from the late 1990s and ongoing).[30]

From the 12th to the 8th centuries BCE, higher education institutes such as the *piyong* 辟雍 and *yanggong* 泮宫 were established to provide the sons of nobles with the advanced knowledge of the time such as music, rituals, poetry, arithmetic and martial arts.[31] The purpose of these institutions was primarily political – to ensure dynastic inheritance and continuity. Little is known about their governance and curricula, but it is known that they were funded by the imperial state.

The Confucian Higher Institute (*taixue* 太学) was China's first imperial university and was institutionally installed for political purposes in the Han Dynasty in 124 BCE, 1,000 years earlier than the Egyptian Al-Azhar University and the Italian University of Bologna, both of which were established for religious purposes. The *taixue* heritage was carried forward for over 2,100 years throughout the following dynasties until the collapse of the Qing in 1911. In its various forms, it is the longest continued tradition of higher education in the world. The *taixue* was not only a community of scholars of advanced knowledge – an equivalent form of the scholarly guilds in the European context – but also served as an arm of the state in that it functioned as a central administrative agency of education (what are ministries of education in many countries today). This tradition still continues in China today in various guises such as the Presidential Accountability System (PAS) led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

"Autonomy," as it is understood in the West, never emerged in the evolution of higher education in China, nor was it a Chinese tradition. It is in this sense that Ruth Hayhoe believes autonomy as a Western concept does not really find root in Chinese soil.[32] There are some exceptions, such as the Jixia Academy and religious institutes established by Buddhists or Taoists, usually located in remote mountainous areas. The Jixia Academy was established by Duke Huan in the state of Qi in the 3rd century BCE. While it was an institution of higher learning and funded by the state of Qi, it was effectively autonomous and self-governed, and such an autonomous tradition was inherited partly by the *shuyuan* 书院, which emerged in the 8th century.[33]

The monastic academies established by Buddhists or Taoists are another exception. It has recently been rediscovered that they were protected in imperial law with a Chartered Conversion Certificate (*dudie* 度牒), which allowed for individuals' independent pursuit of knowledge, mainly religious. The *dudie* system was the equivalent of the papal charter which protected institutional autonomy

30 Li 2016a.
31 Sun 2009, 19–20.
32 Hayhoe 1996.
33 Li 1988; 2018; Sun 2009, 54–59.

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and academic freedom from governmental intervention in medieval Europe.[34] This unique system was officially established in 747 in the Tang Dynasty and legally exempted all individual Buddhists and Taoists and their respective schools from secular services, taxes, incrimination, etc. This autonomous tradition was carried forward partly by the *shuyuan*.[35]

These are exceptions, however, and are by no means representative of the mainstream governing models of HEIs in China. In fact, the recently enhanced PAS has once again emphasized self-mastery as the foundational structure of institutional governance, a move reinforced by the CCP Central Committee General Office (15 October 2014), the National People's Congress Standing Committee (27 December 2015) and the 2015 Higher Education Law (amended). For example, the 2015 Higher Education Law repeatedly states that *zizhu* is a fundamental governing principle of HEIs and should be applied in a wide range of mandates from governing power, human resources and finance to curriculum and programme design, research and international collaborations.[36]

Self-mastery in the Chinese University 3.0

The CCP-led PAS evolved from the Chinese University 2.0 after 1949. Over the past seven decades leading up to the emerging Chinese University 3.0, there have been several important governmental policies and legislation promulgated about university governance in China, as listed in Table 1. It is crucial to reflect on how these models have changed over different time periods in the contemporary era.

University governance in China has developed, in different historical stages, from a PAS (1949–1956) to a PAS led by the CCP (1989–present). The CCP-led PAS eventually gained dominance and has been the longest lasting HEI governance model since 1949 when the People's Republic of China was established by the CCP, meaning that a traditional Chinese model has been established and carried forward, i.e. HEIs as a form of state agency. Meanwhile, the various evolving models of governance have been institutionally inclusive, incorporating foreign influences from France, Germany, the Soviet Union and the United States, as summarized in Figure 1.

When the new China was established in 1949, the urgent political task for the new CCP government was to stabilize and maintain the old higher education system in which many HEIs had adopted French, German or US models of autonomous governance. Given such a political mandate and post-war atmosphere, the council system was temporarily retained in the Republican era (1911–1949). During the 1940s, HEIs enjoyed considerable autonomy, following foreign models, largely owing to the Civil War and the incapable governance of the Nationalist regime. The temporary council system was followed by a PAS with

34 Li 2018.
35 Ibid.
36 National People's Congress Standing Committee 2015.

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Table 1: **Governance Change of Chinese HEIs since 1949**

Period		Policies or Legislations
CU2.0	1950	The Provisional Guidelines of HEIs
	1950	The Decision on Leadership Structure of HEIs
	1953	The Decision on Leadership Structure of HEIs (amended)
	1958	The Guidelines on Educational Work
	1961	The Sixty Guidelines of MOE's HEIs
	1978	The Interim Working Rules of Key National HEIs
	1985	The Decision on the Reform of Educational System
	1985	The Guidelines on Establishing Regular HEIs
	1989	The Notice of Enhancing the Construction of the CCP
CU3.0 ← CU2.0	1990	The Notice of Enhancing the Construction of the CCP in HEIs
	1996	The CCP Guidelines on Grassroots Units in Regular HEIs
	1999	The Higher Education Law
	2007	The Guidelines of the 11th Five-Year Plan for Educational Development
	2012	The Interim Measures for the Formulation of Bylaws of HEIs
	2012	The Implementation Guidelines of the Presidential Responsibility System Led by the CCP in Regular HEIs
	2012	The Regulations of the Congress of Teaching and Administrative Staff
	2014	The Implementation Guidelines on Ensuring and Improving the Presidential Responsibility System Led by the CCP in Regular HEIs
	2014	The Bylaws of Academic Council of HEIs
	2014	The Interim Measures for the Bylaws of University Council
	2015	The Higher Education Law (amended)
	2017	The Opinion of Enhancing and Improving Ideological and Political Work in HEIs

Source:
http://www.moe.gov.cn. Accessed 18 May 2019. Adapted from Li and Li 2019, 213.

much autonomy until September 1956, when the PAS was replaced by a council system led by the CCP.

In the 40 years following 1949, university governance in China oscillated like a pendulum between a PAS and CCP leadership until 1989 when the CCP-led PAS was adopted. The CCP-led PAS has been implemented continuously since then, along with the concept of self-mastery and the influence of foreign models, and has recently been reinforced with three key national initiatives: "The implementation guidelines of ensuring and improving the presidential responsibility system led by the CCP in regular HEIs,"[37] the amended Higher Education Law[38] and "The opinion on enhancing and improving ideological and political work in HEIs."[39]

The Chinese University 3.0 has emerged since the late 1990s, with the CCP-led PAS and alongside the nationwide movements of decentralization, massification, commercialization and internationalization of the higher education system. This

37 CCP Central Committee General Office 2014.
38 National People's Congress Standing Committee 2015.
39 CCP Central Committee and the State Council 2017.

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Figure 1: **Models of University Governance in China since 1949**

	Periods	Models	Features	Diversity
CU2.0	1949–1956	PAS (led by the CCP)	Autonomous	Soviet Union, France, Germany and the US
	1956–1961	Council system led by the CCP	Self-mastering	Inclusive with foreign models
	1961–1966	President-led council system supervised by the CCP	Self-mastering	Inclusive with foreign models
	1966–1976	Committee system of the Cultural Revolution	Chaotic	Chaotic
	1976–1985	Shared governance of president and the CCP	Self-mastering	Inclusive with foreign models
	1985–1989	PAS	Semi-autonomous	Inclusive with foreign models
CU3.0 ← CU2.0	**1989–Present**	**PAS led by the CCP**	**Self-mastering**	**Inclusive with foreign models**

Source:
Author.

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. The PAS preserves a Western tradition of university autonomy, while the CCP leadership serves the interests of the Party on behalf of the state. In most cases, the latter takes the lead in the political vision, mission and major decision making in HEIs in contemporary China.

As illustrated in Figure 2, HEIs funded directly by the central government normally come under the leadership of the MOE or other ministries, which are controlled by the CCP at the national level. Similarly, HEIs funded by provinces or municipalities directly under the central government (the majority of Chinese HEIs) are administered by provincial or municipal bureaus of education, which are led by the CCP at the provincial or municipal level. In the case of

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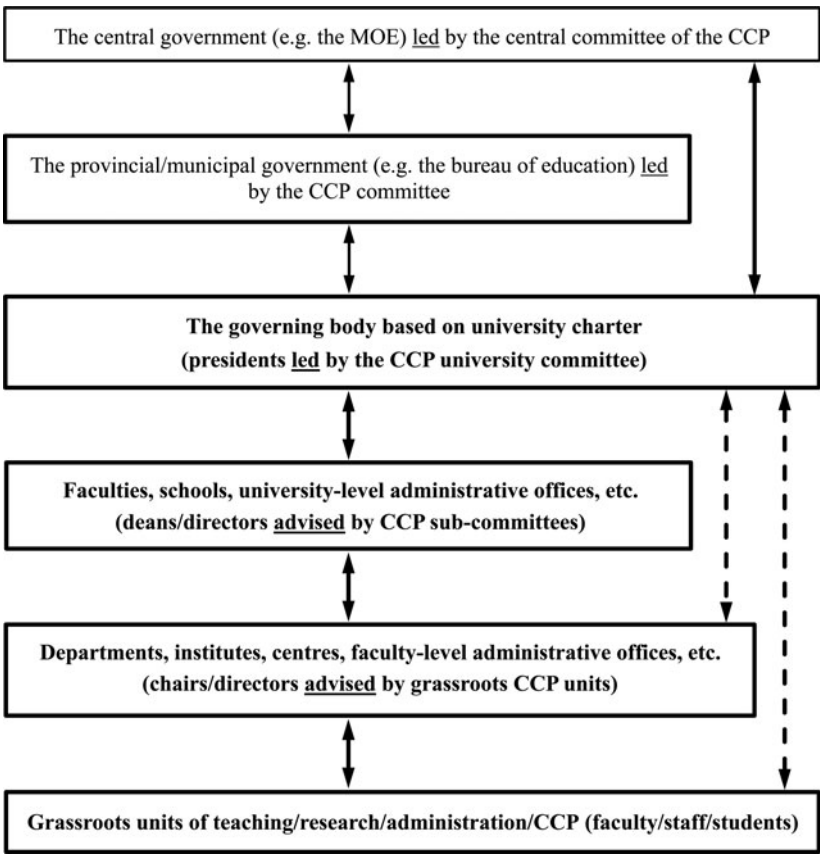
Figure 2: **Governing Structure of Chinese Higher Education Institutions**



Source:
Li 2016b, 143.

private HEIs, the governing body is more advisory and symbolic rather than substantially led by the CCP, so these private institutions appear more responsive and adaptive to socio-economic demand. At the institutional level, the governing body usually consists of the CCP office and the president's office, the former being responsible for the president's office and being led by the CCP university committee. In many cases, the president concurrently serves as a member of the CCP university committee. Since 2013, this governing structure has been systematically legitimized and mandated by university charters.

At an institutional level, the CCP committee occupies the central position of leadership and presidents are *led* by it; both must be held accountable and reviewed annually by their CCP committees at a higher level. For faculties, schools, departments, institutes and centres, the situation is generally and practically the opposite: deans, directors or chairs take the central position of leadership while being supported, monitored and *advised* by the affiliated Party units. Many heads of these sections are concurrently CCP members. In addition to the main task of

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institutional leadership for faculties, schools and administrative offices, the university top management team may sometimes direct the routine administrative work at lower levels of departments, institutes, centres, etc. when there is a need.

Following the system of self-mastery, university presidents, other administrators and staff, as well as various faculty committees and students in the community, are responsible for – or self-master – the day-to-day administration and improvement of HEIs and the management and innovation of learning and teaching, especially for units at lower levels. Aside from the implementation of the CCP and state's political initiatives, all aspects of self-mastery fit well with the "procedural" category of university autonomy in the Western sense.[40]

It must be noted that the Party's leadership on university campus is normally limited to or focused on the political vision, mission and major decision making in HEIs, and the president's office presides over the academic and other administrative affairs of the university, such as how to recruit new faculty members, staff and students, the design of curriculum content and degree standards, the promotion of research and how to allocate funds. The power relationship between the CCP office and the president's office is multidimensional, multilayered, mutually interactive and sometimes dependent on the personal relationships between the individual members of the two governing committees.

With recentralization in recent years, university presidents, academic leaders and faculty members have the political freedom and power to be involved in the CCP leadership and to directly serve the state's interest as represented by the Party, paralleling the traditional role of scholar-officials or public intellectuals in Chinese history. So long as the political vision and mission of HEIs falls in line with the ideological interests and mandate of the CCP on behalf of the state, HEIs can enjoy unlimited freedom of self-mastery. Combined with political correctness, as defined by the Party, this aspect of self-mastery may be described as "substantive" autonomy.[41] Self-mastery as a core value and norm of university governance has created abundant space and dynamism for Chinese HEIs to manage and explore their individual development with diversity.

Evidence from Comparative Case Studies

Two comparative case studies of the Yangtze Normal University (YNU), as a provincial institution, and Nanjing University 南京大学 (Nanda 南大), as a key national institution, were undertaken by the author and the author and a collaborator.[42] Each university was selected as a "common" case.[43] I will briefly summarize and update their related findings to illustrate the core structure of self-mastery in terms of its substantive and procedural aspects. For more details

40 Berdahl 1971, 172.
41 Ibid.
42 Li 2016b; Li and Lin 2011. Yangtze Normal University is a pseudonym.
43 Yin 2014, 52.

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on data collection and the institutional context of the two cases, please refer to the case studies separately.[44]

Yangtze Normal University

YNU is a provincial HEI in east China and has focused on teacher education since the early 1950s. Today, YNU has around 20 schools spread over three urban campuses, with around 1,500 full-time faculty members and 45,000 students studying in over 30 graduate programmes and 90 undergraduate and sub-degree programmes. YNU's governing body includes three CCP committee members, one president and four vice-presidents, with the president concurrently serving on the CCP university committee. The substantive aspects of YNU's self-mastery have been embedded in the evolution of its institutional vision over time. Before the 1990s, its mission was as a teacher-training institution which aimed to educate the qualified talent needed for socialist construction and to contribute to the socialist country.

Obviously, this vision was phrased so as to satisfy the political interests of the party-state while the educational tasks were placed as the central focus of YNU's work. In the late 2010s, YNU's 13th Five-year Strategic Plan reframed its mission. The aim was to build up a comprehensive university with the concerted development of multi-disciplinary areas, focusing on teacher education by strictly following the objectives set by the (recent) CCP University Congress and actively exploring a model of a local institution with a high-quality, global outlook and positive interactions with socio-economic development. Its original mission has not changed much in 30 years.

Both the substantive and procedural aspects of YNU's self-mastery are evident in the recently released YNU charter, which dictates the foundational governing model of YNU. Chapter 1 of the charter lays out the general principles, indicating that YNU must be guaranteed certain basic resources, including funding from the provincial government, and that its self-mastery and benefits as stated in law and regulations, for example its university charter, must be supported by the provincial government. In Principle 8, the charter stipulates the right to exercise self-mastery within the institution in the following areas:

1. The design of programmes and disciplinary areas;
2. Student recruitment;
3. The planning of curricula, teaching materials and facilities;[45]
4. Independent conferral of academic degrees or certificates;
5. Self-initiated research, knowledge transfer and services;
6. The establishment of quality assurance;[46]

44 Li 2016b; Li and Lin 2011.

45 Self-mastery in areas such as curricula planning, however, is often restricted to MOE-categorized mandatory (ideological) courses, various non-ideological courses and specific teaching materials (for instance, required courses in English or foreign language programmes).

46 In recent years, quality assurance has been increasingly controlled by provincial MOE officials, in accord with national MOE dictates.

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7. Employment of faculty members and staff;
8. The management and deployment of funds from the government, revenue, donations, etc.
9. Control over other administrative affairs.

Additionally, in Chapter 4, which concerns YNU's institutional governance and structure, the charter dictates that YNU follow a PAS led by the CCP university committee, with academic affairs governed by teachers in a model of democratic centralism, and that the president be supported by the CCP university committee to independently exercise legitimate duties. Meanwhile, the president is the YNU's legal representative and administrative leader, with four major responsibilities:

1. To initiate and implement YNU's strategic plans and other key plans for administration, teaching and research reform, financing, and annual reports;
2. To initiate and implement YNU's structures and regulations of administration and human resources;
3. To initiate and implement institutional and teaching reform, and that for research;
4. To report the implementation of major initiatives for institutional change or administration to the CCP university committee and the congress of faculty and staff.

Although university charters, which were not introduced until 2013, are a new legal phenomenon in China, the tradition of self-mastery is not new at all. YNU has strived for institutional change and improvement by meeting socio-economic demands using its self-mastery, rather than by being controlled rigidly by the Party leadership, a move which can be seen in the university's ambiguous change of mission in recent decades. YNU was originally tasked by the provincial bureau of education, led by the CCP committee, to serve local teacher training needs. This is made explicit by the term "normal" in the university's title. But, the university has used its freedom of self-mastery to expand its enrolment of students in non-teacher training areas such as programmes in territorial resources and tourism. Such self-mastery was interestingly described by an interviewee:

> We have to recruit students [for survival], so we cannot limit student admissions to teacher training programmes. Like our college, teacher training students constitute only one-third [of the student base], and all the rest are non-teacher training students. Our identity is ambiguous now – the title we have is a normal university, but in fact we no longer focus just on teacher education.[47]

Another interviewee confirmed this perspective:

> We are a *normal* university, right? Most of our students should be studying in teacher education programmes for [our goals are to] prepare prospective teachers. But now our non-teacher education programmes do not prepare teachers, and students in these programmes make up more than half of the total students registered.[48]

47 A focus group interview with a senior male faculty member, at the case study institution, 2 October 2005.

48 Interview with a male department chair, at the case study institution, 29 September 2005.

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In the move towards the massification of higher education since the late 1990s, YNU has substantially exercised its self-mastery to reposition its institutional development by launching new degree programmes, adopting a new credit system, strengthening the teaching workforce and management, upgrading teaching facilities and improving the learning environment, and restructuring academic departments and units.

Nanjing University

Founded in 1902, Nanda used to be the largest and most prestigious comprehensive university in China, with seven schools and 37 departments in the late 1940s. It was left with 13 departments after the reorganization of colleges and departments following Soviet influences in 1952. Only after Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 death in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 open-door policy in 1978 was Nanda able to restore its status as a leading comprehensive university in China. In 2020, Nanda had 88 undergraduate programmes in 31 schools spread across three campuses, with a total of 63,876 students and 2,144 faculty members.[49] Nanda provides an excellent case of how an originally disadvantaged institution was transformed through its self-mastery into a leading, key national comprehensive university within two decades after 1978.

Again, I will first examine how the substantive aspects of Nanda's self-mastery have been embedded in the evolution of its institutional vision over different periods. After many years of struggle to regain its national status as a leading comprehensive university, in 1991 Nanda set down its institutional mission to be an internationally impactful, first-class socialist university and an important base for educating socialist workers and successors in its strategic plan (1991–2000).[50] The 1991 vision statement was revised in 2016 in Nanda's 13th Five-year Strategic Plan:

> Guided by the Theory of Deng Xiaoping … Nanda is to break through such key areas … in order to greatly contribute to the construction of an innovative country, the realization of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation, and the promotion of human civilization advancement.[51]

There have been many changes to Nanda's vision over the 25 years but two core elements remain the same: (1) serving the interests of the party-state, and (2) increasing educational quality for a higher status, both of which in many ways mirror those that are repeatedly highlighted in the vision set out by YNU.

Both the substantive and procedural aspects of Nanda's self-mastery are evident in the Nanda charter, which was approved and released by the MOE in 2014 and amended in 2019. In Article 6 of Chapter 1 on the General Principles, the charter states that:

49 Data taken from Nanda's official website, 28 May 2020, https://www.nju.edu.cn/3642/list.htm.
50 Qu 2002, 179.
51 Nanda's official website, 13 October 2020, https://xxgk.nju.edu.cn/08/c2/c15409a198850/page.htm. Author's translation.

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> The University upholds Marx-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, the Theory of Deng Xiaoping, the important thought of the Three Represents, the Theory of Scientific Development and Xi Jinping's socialist thought with Chinese characteristics in the new times as its guidelines, takes the responsibility of the great realization of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation, keeps the socialist orientation of school administration, fully carries out the educational guidelines of the CCP and the state, follows the law of higher education, self-masters its institutional development by law, and fully finishes the fundamental mission of education nurturing virtues.[52]

Article 18 in Chapter 2 stipulates that a PAS led by the CCP university committee represents the core leadership of the university and that the president is supported to independently and responsibly carry out his/her legal duties. The next article indicates six areas over which the CCP university committee has complete authority: (1) the implementation of Party guidelines directed from a higher level (i.e. the MOE); (2) review of the strategic plan and basic administrative modes for major initiatives of Nanda's development; (3) decisions on human resources; (4) leadership of ideological work and moral education; (5) leadership of the union, student associations, etc.; and (6) any other work required according to law or Party guidelines.

According to the Nanda charter, the president serves as the legal representative and administrative leader of the university, with the responsibility to exercise leadership over the following six areas:

1. The formulation and implementation of Nanda's strategic plans, regulations and annual plans for administration, teaching and research reform, financing, and annual reports;
2. The formulation and implementation of plans for the cultivation of talent, scientific research, social services, cultural inheritance and innovation, and internationalization;
3. The planning of administrative structures, including nomination of administrators at mid-to-low levels;
4. Annual expenditure budgeting and fundraising;
5. Chairing the joint meeting of the CCP and administrative committees, and reporting to the Congress of Nanda faculty and staff;
6. Any other duties by law.

The term "self-mastery" appears a total of nine times in the charter, which prescribes how Nanda may exercise its self-mastery, including over institutional administration, development, research, teaching, innovation, student recruitment and financing, etc. Compared with the YNU charter, there are fewer mentions of self-mastery in the Nanda charter but nonetheless both charters cover almost all aspects of institutional governance.

Nanda's institutional development between 1984 and 1997 provides a rare glimpse into self-mastery in terms of both its substantive and procedural aspects.

52 MOE's official website, 13 October 2020, http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A02/zfs_gdxxzc/201912/t20191216_412274.html. Author's translation.

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Nanda's early history, prestigious status, location in the Nationalist capital and, most particularly, its links to Chiang Kai-shek as its president were seen as an "original sin" after the CCP came to power in 1949. In the forty years from 1949 up to the 1990s, Nanda did not receive any major priority funding from the central government. For this reason, Nanda's leaders sought to reclaim the university's glorious past in the new political environment. Qu Qinyue 曲钦岳 was a leading figure in this effort, serving as president of the university for three consecutive terms from 1984 to 1997.

Although most presidents of national universities in China were members of the CCP at the time of his appointment, Qu was not. In response to the radical socio-economic changes, he devised a development plan for the period between 1984 and 1990 immediately upon taking up his position. His aim was to build a leading national centre for teaching and research, with multi-disciplinary programmes, its own institutional characteristics and an international reputation. Qu was concerned that the limited space of the main campus located in the centre of Nanjing city constrained Nanda's development. In 1988, the central government supported his plan for campus expansion with the promise of funding a special budget of 9.45 million yuan. The construction of the new campus went ahead, yet the promised funds were never received, plunging Nanda into a debt crisis. Qu decided to resign from his presidency in late 1995 in protest: "if the government continues to pay lip service and not take real responsibility, it will be very difficult for the development of education to meet the needs of social change."[53]

Qu's recalcitrance triggered the transformation of Nanda's status by the central government and served as a turning point for the next step in Nanda's development under the leadership of his successor, Jiang Shusheng 蒋树声, another non-Party president in Nanda's contemporary history. In 1999, Nanda was among the first nine universities to be included in the national "985" project. Nanda's exploitation of its right to self-mastery as a key national university is not exceptional, of course. Other HEIs, such as Wuhan University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Fudan University, Peking University and Zhejiang University, have also demonstrated such self-determination.

One observation that can be drawn from these two case studies concerns the differences in the balance of power between the two HEIs and their higher authorities. YNU is a local HEI under the direct leadership of the Yangtze provincial government and appears to enjoy much more freedom and autonomy, as shown in the YNU charter, which mentions the term self-mastery in respect of institutional development 16 times. Nanda is a key national HEI and as such reports directly to the MOE. Authority over Nanda is shared between the MOE and the Jiangsu provincial government. The term self-mastery only appears nine times in the Nanda charter, which had to be approved by the MOE. Although it is hard to generalize the differences in the power relations

53 Ibid., 277.

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enjoyed by the two HEIs and their higher authorities, it is obvious that the more local an institution, the more freedom it has to decide on institutional governance, whereas the closer an HEI is to the central government, the more political control it has to endure.

It is true in recent years that in both YNU and Nanda self-mastery appears to be increasingly illusionary as more control is being exercised by the party-state in more ways. For example, freedom in curricula planning is often restricted to the MOE-stipulated mandatory (ideological) courses, various non-ideological courses and specific teaching materials (for instance, required courses in English or foreign language programmes). Self-established quality assurance mechanisms are regularly checked and monitored by the MOE or provincial officials in accord with national dictates (for example, the National Evaluation of Undergraduate Teaching by the MOE's Higher Education Evaluation Centre), in addition to being closely controlled by the teaching affairs office, a supra-institutional unit that is monitored by the CCP at the institutional level in both cases. Furthermore, self-management and deployment of funds are subject to external regulations and audits. In certain ways, some of the limitations placed on self-mastery in Chinese universities mirror recent constraints on the autonomy of Western universities.

A *zhong-yong* Model of University Governance?

The two cases of YNU and Nanda provide complex, dynamic and contrasting pictures of what constitutes self-mastery, as typified by the CCP-led PAS, and how it has worked and continues to work differently in the same context of the Chinese University 3.0. The CCP-led PAS has inherited the humanistic tradition of HEIs (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一), which emphasizes state agencies that directly serve the interests of individuals and the nation and that bear a political pragmatism rooted in Confucian epistemology and focusing on ethics.[54] This epistemological gene of political pragmatism is completely different from that found in the Western tradition, which is rooted in classical, theological knowledge and centred in modern, scientific truth. As I have elaborated elsewhere, this observation helps to explain the difference in the purposes and models of the university in China and in Western societies (see Figure 3).[55]

The siting of self-mastery at the core of university governance stems from the emphasis Confucianism places on the self-cultivation of personal virtues, and lies in the normative purpose of both *zhi* 知 and *xing* 行 in Confucian humanism. According to the Confucian classic, *The Great Learning*, the purpose of higher learning is "To let one's innate virtue shine forth, to renew the people, and to rest in the highest good." In accordance with the Eight Steps of Learning, Confucian political pragmatism prescribes that the *zhi-xing* mission begins with the learning and expansion of knowledge, goes through self-cultivation of

54 Li 2009; Li and Hayhoe 2012.
55 Li 2012, 330–31; 2018.

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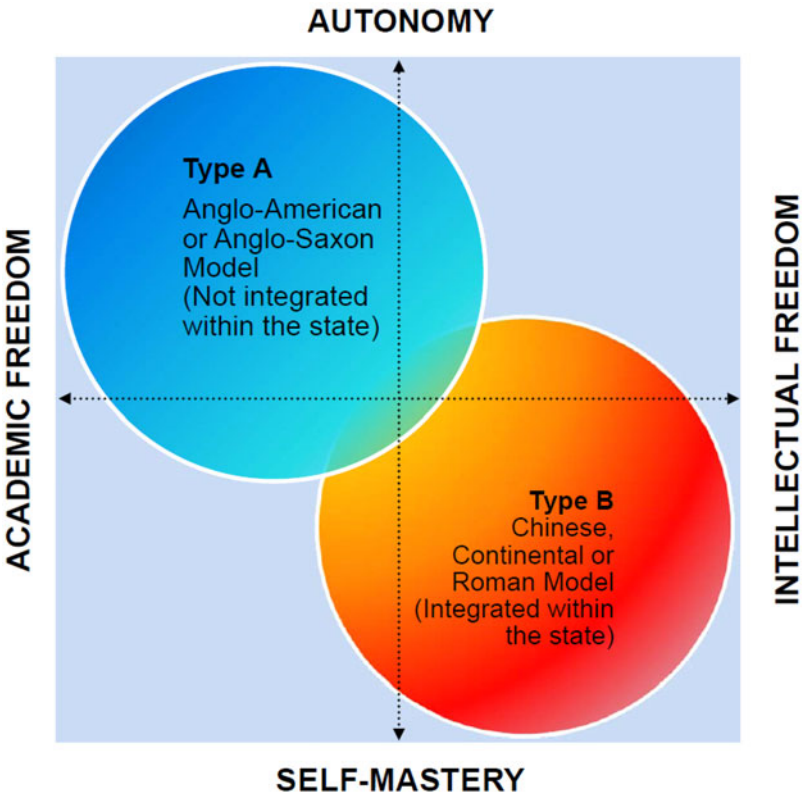
Figure 3: **University Models**



Source:
Li 2012, 332.

personhood and the care of family, and ends up with responsibility to the state and for making a peaceful world for all people, all centred on the cultivation of individual morality for socio-political development.

This Confucian humanism is captured in the pragmatism of *zhong-yong* 中庸, a core belief, value and norm of Confucianism, which I have discussed in the context of the Chinese model of the university previously.[56] The *zhong-yong* model is not limited to the exploration of scientific truth, which is where Western HEIs are centred, but bases the interactive and progressive process of higher learning and education first on the exploration of nature and the self. This process of learning is then expanded into moral perfection in terms of the growth of personhood, deontological capacity and ethical wisdom for a benevolent, free and equitable secular world.[57]

56 Li 2015; 2016b; 2018.
57 Li 2018.

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Chinese HEIs focus on the deontological dimension of the educational aim, which is to cultivate an individual's potential to maintain social justice, an element which can be captured by *zhong*. This carries forward the rational and ethical spirit of the Civil Service Examination (*keju* 科举) for equitable higher education (for example, with the *gaokao* 高考 system), and is based on the Confucian principle of "education without discrimination."[58] On the other hand, the model of self-mastery highlights the genetic, pragmatic integration and deployment of HEIs by the state (and the CCP after 1949) to serve the state's interest, as represented by *yong*, whether this be termed state paternalism, political control, secular rationality or, indeed, the Chinese model of university governance. These two dimensions of the *zhong-yong* model cover, but are not limited to, many elements of university autonomy in the Western sense, i.e. substantive and procedural aspects.

There is a fundamental, ethical assumption behind the *zhong-yong* model of self-mastery. The state, represented by the central government, i.e. the Party in contemporary China, must be just to all its citizens and, broadly and ethically, to all peoples in the world. This assumption is based on the extremely high, moral expectation of a sage-king in ancient China, one who is capable of acting with benevolence, righteousness, selfless courage and wisdom on behalf of the state – all rooted in the practicality of *zhong-yong* – for an ideal commonwealth world for all. Therefore, HEIs are expected to work with such a sage-king, who represents the state for the benefit of the state and people, as indicated in the purpose of higher learning as set out in *The Great Learning*. In reality, this ideal is hardly ever realized in real practices – nor indeed has it ever been in Chinese history. However, through the pragmatism of self-mastery, it enables Chinese HEIs to directly serve the state and, at the same time, to give legitimacy to the state power to develop HEIs as a priority and create abundant space and resources for HEIs in order that they may fully unfold their potentialities.

The pragmatic, normative *zhong-yong* model of self-mastery can be widely observed in the various processes and dimensions of the development of the Chinese University 3.0, such as the unprecedented quest for world-class status, systematic marketization, revolutionary massification, structural optimization, institutional digitalization and all-round internationalization. The *zhong-yong* governance model has enabled Chinese HEIs to radically and quickly transform themselves in a short period of time and become global leaders in terms of quality, quantity and uniqueness. The degree of system change achieved in such a short time span is miraculous and unimaginable for universities within the Western tradition of autonomy. Although Chinese HEIs may have to sacrifice autonomous freedom in some ways, the *zhong-yong* model provides the opportunities and space for them to be involved in and lead the socio-economic and political development of Chinese society and work for the interests of the public in the long term.

58 *The Analects of Confucius*, 15:39.

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Concluding Remarks

The complexity and dynamism of pragmatic self-mastery demonstrates multi-layered and multidirectional power relationships in institutional governance in the Chinese University 3.0, which is probably the most dynamic system of higher education in the world today. If we were to imagine a scenario in which the role played by the Party in university governance was replaced by a university council in the Western sense, the *zhong-yong* model of self-mastery might resemble the autonomy of the Anglo-Saxon or North American model of the university. But, we should not forget the fundamental difference here: the CCP is an ideologically directed party which represents a form of "political correctness" that is very different from the constitutionally independent autonomy represented by the university council. Constitutional autonomy is being learned by Chinese HEIs with the recent move towards legitimizing the self-mastery in governance with university charters.

It is widely recognized that the absence of external controls does not guarantee academic freedom, and certain elements of external control do not endanger intellectual independence, as concluded by Frank Schmidtlein and Robert Berdahl.[59] Three recent separate measures, taken by governments in Canada and the US, serve as excellent examples.

Following the movement for freedom of expression on North American campuses, the provincial government of Ontario announced on 30 August 2018 that all public HEIs in Ontario must put in place and enforce a freedom of expression policy by 1 January 2019.[60] To monitor the implementation of such a policy, HEIs are required to report annually on their progress to the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), starting in September 2019. HEIs that fail to do so face budget cuts, and students failing to follow the policy are subject to disciplinary measures. All public HEIs in Ontario have followed the governmental guidelines. Although the policy itself might serve a just social cause, as a governmental imposition it may backfire on university autonomy.

In the same year but on a separate matter, the US federal government banned the products of Huawei, a giant Chinese information and communications technology company, from its domestic market, and lobbied allies such as Australia, France, Japan, Germany and the UK to do the same. Bowing to this political pressure, MIT and the universities of Oxford, California and Stanford all ended their respective collaborations with Huawei and no longer receive research funding from the tech giant, despite the fact that no evidence had been found thus far to support the accusations of the US government. Although these Western institutions had worked successfully with Huawei for many years, they immediately fell in line with the US federal ban, ignoring their institutional tradition of autonomy.

59 Schmidtlein and Berdahl 2011, 71.

60 "Ontario protects free speech on campuses: mandates universities and colleges to introduce free speech policy by January 1, 2019." Office of the Premier, 30 August 2018, https://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2018/08/ontario-protects-free-speech-on-campuses.html. Accessed 18 May 2019.

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A third example is the recent suspension of several Confucius Institutes in the US, again for political reasons. As language and cultural education institutes on university campuses in the US, Confucius Institutes have been sponsored by the Chinese government since 2004. They fell victim to fears that the Chinese government was interfering with the autonomy of US universities through its financial sponsorship. These fears take little account of the massive research funding received by US universities which also comes from governmental sources.[61] Accusations of Chinese interference by the US government have not been backed up with any form of sustained analysis of supporting evidence and appear to have been made purely for political purposes. According to Paul Bell, former vice-provost of the University of Oklahoma, to date "the only interference in academic freedom that I have seen has come from the US government and a handful of politicians who have decided that bashing anything they see as portraying China in a positive light is good for their own political careers."[62]

These recent moves have sparked controversial debates, especially concerning whether such governmental impositions go against the Western tradition of university autonomy, be it intentionally or unintentionally. It is ironic that, in the third example, US accusations of external interference have led exactly to that. Although these cases have arisen coincidentally and consecutively, in truth probably no university in the world is truly immune from government, market or third-sector organization interference; the only difference might be the degree or the manner of interference and whether that may be considered Western autonomy or Chinese self-mastery.

It is thus critical and timely to reflect on Guy Neave's observation that it is not only in the UK that accepted notions of autonomy are under siege.[63] Robert Berdahl and John Millett conclude that American universities have been operating under a "self-denying ordinance,"[64] which is somewhat similar to self-mastery in the Chinese context, a phenomenon metaphorized as "Prometheus bound."[65] This has also been documented in other contexts such as Canada, France and Germany.[66] Worse still, the situation has been deteriorating at an accelerating speed in recent decades,[67] especially alongside the ubiquitous influence of the so-called global ranking regime.[68] Ronald Barnett was probably right when three decades ago he declared that higher education in the modern world is inescapably bound to its host society and that any aspiration of autonomy or academic freedom is a nonsense, both sociologically and philosophically.[69]

61 Sautman 2013.
62 Bell 2019.
63 Neave 1988, 31.
64 Berdahl and Millett 1991, 220.
65 Neave and van Vught 1991.
66 See Neave and van Vught 1994; Paulson 1894; Rashdall 1895b; Viczko 2013.
67 Brook 1996; Russell 1993.
68 Chou 2014; Li 2016c.
69 Barnett 1988, 88.

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The fact that the emerging Chinese University 3.0 is clearly characterized by the *zhong-yong* model of self-mastery brings both advantages and disadvantages to its institutional development. Imbued with the Confucian principle of *he'er butong* (harmony with diversity),[70] self-mastery is a core value and norm of university governance for Chinese HEIs in their current stage of development and represents an additional model of autonomy to the four Western models categorized by Neave – Bologna, Paris, France (Napoleonic) and Britain.[71] It remains to be seen whether this *zhong-yong* model of governance and leadership can help Chinese universities to survive, open up and flourish as dynamic and contributing institutions that seek excellence in knowledge production and application and which serve China and the rest of the world by creating a brighter, more democratic future.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical note

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摘要: 以英美大学为代表的安格鲁-撒克逊模式和美国模式、以及欧陆模式，经历了三次历史性的大转型。本文探讨的，就是在英美模式以及包括最近崛起的中国大学3.0在内的欧陆模式基础上形成的模糊概念——自治。基于两个比较案例研究所收集的实证数据以及文档分析，本文作者探究了自主的中庸模式结构，试图证明它与西方模式的不同，并为它们的区别提供文化解释。论文的一个结论是，中国背景下的自主为世界提供了与自治不同的、根源于中庸的儒家实用主义理念。本研究也发现，通过自主的实用主义，中庸模式使中国大学直接服务于国家。与此同时，它把赋予大学优先发展的国家权力合法化，从而为它们潜力的充分拓展创造足够的空间及资源。伴随多层向的权力关系——尽管必须牺牲自治的某些自由，这一治理模式使中国大学在短期内奇迹般地稳步转型，并最终成为全球的引领者。

70 Li 2012; 2018.
71 Neave 1988, 33–38.

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关键词: 自治; 自主; 学术自由; 大学治理; 中国大学3.0; 中式大学; 中庸模式; 高等教育领导力; 改进; 发展

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