Modernizing China's Tertiary Education Sector: Enhanced Autonomy or Governance in the Shadow of Hierarchy?

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Abstract

The Chinese government has acknowledged that in order to turn Chinese universities into world class institutions, it will have to grant them a greater degree of autonomy. However, the reforms that have been introduced to achieve this goal run counter to a long tradition of central government oversight. The question now presenting itself is how much actual control government has devolved to universities. The qualitative evidence presented in this paper, obtained through interviews with university presidents and Party secretaries, not only confirms that, as one might expect, Chinese universities continue to operate "in the shadow of hierarchy," but also and more importantly that formal efforts to devolve authority are being rendered ineffective by informal pressures and control mechanisms. Discussion reflects on the state of play in Chinese public administration studies, and urges public policy researchers examining devolution in China to account for both formal reforms and everyday "lived experiences."

Keywords: China; tertiary education reform; governance; metagovernance

Since the 1980s, China's system of governance has undergone fundamental change.[1] Changes have also been effected in the governance of the Chinese tertiary education system with the introduction of reforms to modernize universities and enhance their formal autonomy.[2] However, it is not clear whether university administrators view these reforms as granting them more actual freedom to govern their institutions as they deem fit.

Studies examining Chinese tertiary education reforms have tended to focus on the formal/legal aspects of these reforms,[3] and although such studies generate important knowledge, they shed little light on whether university administrators

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1 Su, Walker and Xue 2013.
2 Li, Meng 2003; Li, Lixu 2004; Pepper 2000; Mok 2005; 2013.
3 See, e.g., Law 1995; Li, Lixu 2004.

perceive these reforms as enhancing the actual capacity of universities to "self-govern." This study aims to answer this empirical question and to gain a deeper insight into the lived experiences of university presidents responsible for the day-to-day management of Chinese universities.

This paper begins with an overview of Chinese tertiary education reforms. It then provides a brief description of the standard system used to govern Chinese universities. It continues with analyses of the authors' interviews with leading university administrators to ascertain how these reforms are viewed by the Party secretaries charged with overseeing the universities and whether the university presidents responsible for the day-to-day management of universities experience these reforms as substantive and meaningful or as merely symbolic. This multi-track approach, so we reasoned, would enable us not only to detect gaps between *formal* reforms and everyday "lived experiences" but also to illuminate the *informal* ways in which power and influence are being exerted (for example, via established norms, professional expectations, habits, rituals, customs and standardized routines) as well as the many *informal* ways in which authorities can expand or curtail autonomy (for example, turning a blind eye to non-complying subordinates, refusing to provide a positive reference to non-complying subordinates). In other words, rather than adopt a legalistic perspective and focus narrowly on formal autonomy-enhancing reforms, we decided to analyse such principle–agent dynamics from a broader governance and new-institutionalism perspective, taking into account the many informal ways in which stakeholders can be empowered or disempowered.[4]

Governance scholars studying "state capacity" have long suggested that more attention be given to informal influences.[5] There now appears to be a growing consensus that "autonomy" can easily be overstated when focusing too narrowly on formal devolution arrangements. This idea features prominently in debate about "metagovernance," with authors focusing on devolution in Western countries[6] and arguing that devolved governance arrangements tend to operate "in the shadow of hierarchy."[7] Metagovernance scholars acknowledge that governments have started to use new "modes of governance" (for example, markets, networks, persuasion), but they insist that this shift should not be equated with "state withdrawal" or "increased capacity to self-govern."[8] This, so they argue, is because government will typically retain ultimate control and remain the main custodian of the governance arrangement in question.

The metagovernance literature emerged as a critique of the "governance" literature that maintained that the reforms of the 1990s (for example, privatization, contracting out) were eroding "state capacity" and "hollowing-out" central

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4 DiMaggio and Powell 1983; March and Olsen 1989; Meyer and Rowan 2006.
5 Bevir, Rhodes and Weller 2003; Rhodes 2002.
6 Hysing 2009; Koch 2013; Marinetto 2003; Sørensen and Torfing 2009.
7 Jessop 1997; Héritier and Lehmkuhl 2008.
8 Bell and Hindmoor 2009.

governments.[9] What governance and metagovernance scholars have in common, though, is a rather narrow focus on Western countries with free-market economies, and it is thus tempting to dismiss these perspectives as of little relevance to China. However, China has begun to introduce the kinds of free-market and decentralization reforms that gave rise to the 1990s governance debate, and from that perspective it seems pertinent to ask whether the reforms being introduced in China involve straightforward downward devolution of authority, or devolution of formal authority offset by novel ways in which government retains oversight.

Very similar questions were raised in debates about "de-administration" in the Chinese higher education sector. Although this literature identifies particular areas in which Chinese universities have gained greater autonomy,[10] on the whole there appears to be consensus about a persistent lack of autonomy.[11] As Bao Xi Wang and Kou-Hong Tao show with the help of surveys conducted among mid-level university administrators, devolution in China's tertiary education has typically been symbolic rather than substantive.[12] In order to verify this, we decided to use an approach that would allow us to capture both formal and informal aspects.

Whereas we could rely on publicly available Chinese tertiary education reform documents for our analysis of the *formal* ways in which university autonomy has been enhanced, our analysis of *informal* aspects required us to dig deeper and to find a way to assess whether university administrators feel *able* to use the discretion granted to their institution. This, we felt, was best gauged using semi-structured interviews with university Party secretaries (charged with overseeing universities) and university presidents (responsible for day-to-day management). Before discussing our methods and findings, it is useful to elaborate what we expected to find.

Hypothesis

As shown below, China's tertiary education sector has undergone several rounds of reform to enhance university autonomy. Although this may seem obvious, we decided to formulate this as a hypothesis (H1), as doing so helps to clarify the contribution we are making and demonstrates the importance of contrasting formal and informal evaluations of autonomy. Drawing on the governance, metagovernance and new institutionalism literatures, and taking China's historical trajectory into account, we reasoned that the net effect of these reforms could easily be overstated when focusing narrowly on formal reforms. Accordingly, we hypothesized that informal norms and expectations would produce a reluctance

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9 Pierre and Peters 2000; Rhodes 1996.
10 Yang, Rui, Vidovich and Currie 2007.
11 Bie and Feng 2011; Miao 2015; Hayhoe et al. 2012; Chen 2010; Tan and Yin 2013.
12 Wang, Bao Xi, and Tao 2016

to enact formal devolved discretion (H2). Formally stated, our hypotheses read as follows:

H1: Reforms in Chinese tertiary education have increased university administrators' *formal* capacity to self-govern.

H2: University presidents are reluctant to exercise their *formal* capacity to self-govern for fear of contravening established norms and expectations and incurring a backlash.

China's Hierarchical Cold War Education System

China's tertiary education system was established shortly after the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and modelled on the system in the former Soviet Union. Like its Soviet counterpart, it was characterized by highly centralized, hierarchical authority and control (exercised by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) and affiliated ministries).

From the 1950s onwards, the Chinese government tightened its control over the sector amid fears that universities could become hotbeds for ideological dissent; this control was further intensified during the 1967–1976 Cultural Revolution. This raised concerns among sceptics about a lack of academic freedom, a concern which continues to animate contemporary research.[13] It was not until 1978, when Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 rose to power, that reforms were introduced to the sector.

As researchers have shown, "academic freedom" can be compromised not only by excessive government interference but also by an overdependence on private sector funding.[14] As Li Meng explains, without a "solid wall" to safeguard a university's independence, academic freedom will be at risk.[15] Although this is not the place to discuss these normative issues further, it is important to recognize that China has a long history of resisting university autonomy.

Post-1980 Tertiary Education Reforms

Reforms began in earnest in the mid-1980s with the announcement by the CCCPC of the "1985 Decision on the reform of education system" (1985 Decision hereafter).[16] This reflected the post-Cultural Revolution zeitgeist and was designed to normalize the governance of higher education in China.[17] It was, arguably, the most comprehensive of all of the reforms in that it established

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13 Altbach 2001; He 2002.
14 Bok 1970; Jaspers 1959; Van de Graaff et al. 1978.
15 Li, Meng 2003.
16 CCCPC 1985.
17 The 1985 Decision is believed to have been the direct result of effective lobbying by a number of university presidents in charge of prestigious Chinese universities. The goal of turning Chinese universities into world class ones was articulated on 4 May 1998 at the centennial anniversary of Peking University by the-then PRC president, Jiang Zemin.

a new overarching governance framework, thereby paving the way for future reforms.

The 1985 Decision had three objectives: to reduce top-down government authority; to increase self-governing capacity; and to better meet societal demand. Universities were to be given greater autonomy to determine curricula, to create pathways for student exchange and to allocate funding for capital works. A year later, the State Council issued the "1986 Provisional regulations concerning the management of higher learning institutions," a reform proposal which merely reiterated the goals outlined in the 1985 Decision.

Reforms were suspended in 1989 in response to the Tiananmen Square incident, but they resumed in 1993 when the CCCPC and the State Council issued their "Outline for reform and development of education in China."[18] This declaration renewed the central government's commitment to modernizing the tertiary education sector and proposed to gradually reduce the entrenched hierarchical nature of the sector. However, it was not until 1996 that these principles were implemented when the State Education Commission introduced reforms that gave universities the authority to identify sponsors, set up funding mechanisms and appoint administrators ("governors") with distinct duties and responsibilities. These reforms, codified in the 1996 "Regulations on the work of grassroot organizations in colleges and universities," established a rather ambivalent multi-level governance system with the central government clearly at the helm but with universities being granted considerable formal powers to "self-govern."[19]

The government subsequently charged the State Council with the implementation of three more reform waves to free 408 universities from direct oversight by upper-level central ministries and render the system leaner and less hierarchical. Likewise, the 1998 Higher Education Law, introduced by the National People's Congress (NPC), formally recognized the independent legal status of higher education institutions,[20] and granted colleges and universities the authority to recruit faculty staff, establish majors programmes and determine areas of research excellence.[21]

The reforms of the 1980s were geared towards establishing a new governance framework and rationale; the reforms of the 1990s and 2000s were more specific, identifying the exact roles and responsibilities of officials and institutions. There were five reforms in total: the 1996 "Regulations of the Communist Party of China on the work of grassroot organizations in colleges and universities";[22]

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18 CCCPC and State Council 1993.
19 CCCPC 1996.
20 The 1985 Decision and the Higher Education Law promulgate the independent legal status of universities. This status places universities on an equal legal footing with the government when engaging in activities such as teaching, research and public service. Thus, from a legal perspective, Chinese universities have the capacity to protect the academic freedom of the faculty from intervention by the state or society.
21 NPC 1998.
22 CCCPC 1996.

the 1998 Higher Education Law;[23] the 2014 "Regulations for academic committee of higher education institutions" (issued by the Ministry of Education);[24] the 2012 "Regulations of conference of representatives of faculty and staff of colleges and universities" (issued by the Ministry of Education);[25] and the 2017 "Interim measures of the administration of leaders of higher education institutions" (issued by the Organization Department of the Party's Central Committee).[26] Table 1 indicates the degree of formal authority that has been devolved to China's universities.

Before turning to informal factors, it is useful to provide a schematic overview of the local actors and bodies governing Chinese universities. As can be seen from Figure 1, there are four main governing bodies, occupying three levels: the central government's Party Committee (level 1), which comprises the Party secretary, the deputy Party secretary, the university's president and vice-presidents; the Administrative Level (level 2), which comprises the university president, vice-presidents, dean and associated deans; and the Academic Committee and Annual Conference (level 3), which is made up of high-profile academics. As Figure 1 shows, university presidents occupy a peculiar position in this hierarchy, being both the leader of their university and a member of central government's Party committee.

We also analysed the composition, appointment process and appointment criteria for each of these four levels of governance. As Table 2 shows, here, too, the overall picture that emerges seems to confirm a rather traditional hierarchical ordering of governing bodies with clear lines of command between them. This is to be expected in a country where, traditionally, state control has been the main *modus operandi*.

The final step in our analysis of formal reform documents focused on the specific allocation of roles and responsibilities. This knowledge, so we reasoned, would be essential and enable us to ascertain with more certainty whether or not the autonomy enhancing reforms have materialized and, if so, whether they have given university presidents a greater say in the governance of their university. As can be seen from Table 3, the respective roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and specific.

The central government's Party Committee retains a monopoly over strategic policymaking decisions, and the Administrative Level's main role continues to revolve primarily around implementation and enforcement of Party Committee policy. From that perspective, it would be fair to describe the tertiary education system as purely hierarchical in character. That said, the Administrative Level is entrusted to perform many additional tasks, and this would appear to be evidence of a growing preparedness to devolve roles and responsibilities. Hence, it is

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23 NPC 1998.
24 MoE 2014.
25 MoE and NGLU 2012.
26 CCCPC Organization Department 2017.

Table 1: **Autonomy Enhancing Reforms**

Tertiary	1985	1986	1993	1996	1998	2012	2014	2017
Education Reforms	Decision on the Reform of the Education System	Provisional Regulations Concerning the Management of Institutions of Higher Learning	Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China	CCP Regulations on the Work of Grassroot Organizations in Colleges and Universities	PRC Higher Education Law	Regulations of Conference of Representatives of Faculty and Staff (CRFS)	Regulations for Academic Committee of Higher Education Institutions	Interim Measures of the Administration of Leaders of Higher Education Institutions
Measures that enhance university autonomy	Allowing universities to determine curricula and create pathways for international exchange	State Council adopts and promulgates measures introduced in the 1985 Decision	Central government renews its commitment to enhancing university autonomy	The university Party Committee manages and streamlines the work performed by university	Universities to govern their own affairs and implement democratic management	The CRFS is the channel through which faculty and staff participate in the governance of the university	Academic Committee as highest level inside university, in charge of managing academic affairs	The Interim Measures establish legal guidelines for decisions on university leader promotions and demotions
	Allowing universities to enter into partnerships with socialist research institutes			University presidents manage university affairs, under the leadership of the Party Committee	Universities granted legal personality status, with the president as representative	The CRFS to supervise leaders and higher-level bodies of governance of the university	Universities to respect the role of the Academic Committee and to facilitate the implementation of management decisions	
	Universities to suggest appointments and to remove presidents			The Party Committee assists the president's independent work to accomplish teaching and research goals	Colleges and universities are endowed legal personality and rights	Universities to establish staff input channels, adopt advice if possible, and justify decisions not to ignore	Academic Committee has autonomy, and will promote innovation and ensure academic freedom	
	Granting universities greater say in capital works funding						75% of Academic Committee to be members of faculty	

Figure 1: **China's Tertiary Education Governance Framework**
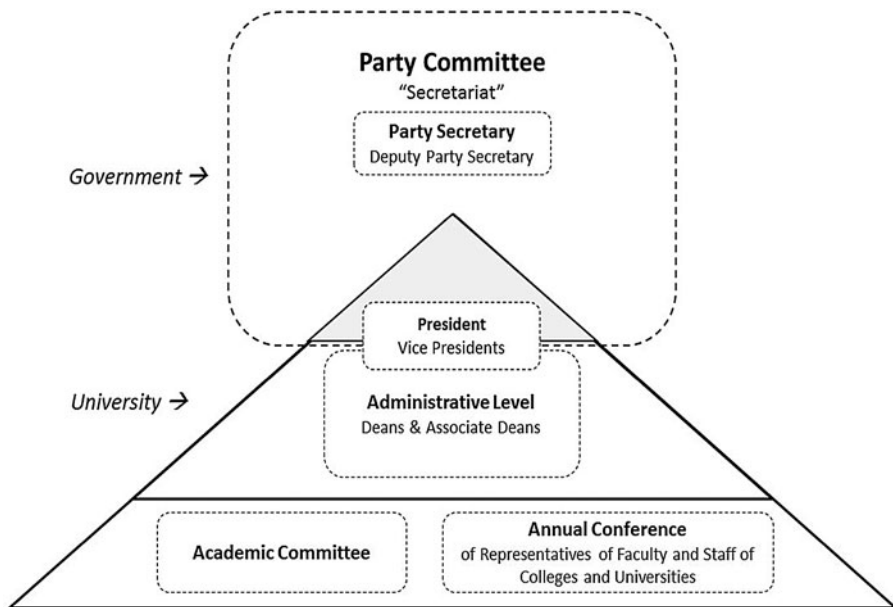
important to pay attention to detail and to acknowledge that tasks can be devolved downwards *with* the requirement of having to report compliance and progress (thereby limiting de facto autonomy), or *without* such requirements (thereby bolstering de facto autonomy). For example, the provision enabling the Administrative Level to develop university-specific regulations would seem to be a clear case of a devolved responsibility that enhances university autonomy. However, the same cannot be said about being granted the right to implement and enforce policy, as this provides little or no discretion over the policy being implemented and/or enforced. Indeed, this kind of downward authority transfer could even be regarded as *reinforcing* hierarchy. From this perspective, it is clear that we cannot draw meaningful overall conclusions about changes in autonomy on the basis of a simple list of formal reforms.

In sum, an examination of the tables and diagram alone would indicate that authority in the tertiary education governance system is hierarchical and top-down. However, the many autonomy-enhancing reforms that have been adopted since the 1980s and research evidence show that universities have gained more autonomy in certain administrative areas.[27] When considering these reforms, it would appear justified to conclude that, as we hypothesized (H1), subsequent incremental reforms in tertiary education have at least to some extent increased universities' formal capacity to "self-govern."

27 Yang, Rui, Vidovich and Currie 2007.

Table 2: **The Governance of China's Universities: Constituents, Appointing Bodies and Appointment Criteria**

	Members	Appointing Body	Appointment Criteria
University Party Committee	a) The Party secretary as the symbolic leader; b) Party secretary and vice-Party secretary; c) President and several vice-presidents; d) Other key administrators	a) The Party Committee of the upper-level government; b) The entity of power of the upper-level government	a) CCP members and loyalty to the party-state and the president of the PRC; b) Coordinative and leadership skills; c) Experience as a medium-level administrator
University Administrators	a) The president as the symbolic leader; b) The president and vice-presidents; c) Deans and vice-deans; d) Heads or directors of research institute	a) The Party Committee of the upper-level government; b) The Party Committee of the university	a) CCP members and loyalty to the party-state and the president; b) Leadership skills; c) Experience as a medium-level administrator; d) Certain academic skills
Academic Committee	a) Chaired by a vice-president; b) Officially tenured professors with prestigious status in one academic field	a) The Party Committee of the university; b) The grassroots faculty members	a) Loyalty to the party-state and the president of the PRC; b) Specialty in one or several academic fields
Annual Conference	a) All the faculty and staff on campus; b) Other officially employed workers	a) The Party Committee of the university; b) The grassroots faculty; c) Administrators at the school or college level	a) Loyalty to the party-state and president of the PRC; b) Employees of the university including faculty, staff and other workers

Table 3: **The Governance of China's Universities: Roles and Responsibilities**

	Party Committee	**Administrative Tier**	**Academic Committee**	**Annual Conference**
Main role	*Policymaking*	*Implementation*	*Planning*	*Consultation*
Specific tasks	a) Establishing the grassroots Party organization of the university; b) Ensuring Party Committee integrity; c) Strengthen the standing of the mainstream Marxist ideology and its sinicized forms; d) Strengthen anti-corruption measures and ensure ideological dissemination; e) Perform other government tasks, such as liaising, retirement planning, security and secrecy work; f) Establish university charters, university strategic development planning, annual working plan; g) Set academic targets regarding teaching, research and public service; h) Oversee the composition of all levels of internal administrative organizations; i) Oversee the selection, appointment or removal of medium-level officials	a) Implement guidelines and policies of the upper-level Party Committee; b) Enforce policies and decisions issued by the Party Committee of the university; c) Ideological diffusion; d) Develop institution-specific regulations; e) Supervision of day-to-day teaching, research and other affairs; f) School development plan and campus construction plan; g) Disciplining students and promoting talent nurturing plan; h) Annual working plan and budget, reform resolutions	a) Planning regarding faculty composition, research, curriculum, and scholarly communication with overseas scholars or organizations; b) Independently setting majors or disciplines; c) Plans regarding the structure of academic organizations, inter-disciplines, trans-disciplines, and allocation of academic resources; d) Qualifications to be awarded, academic degrees, cultivating standards for curricular education; e) Regulations and charter of the Academic Committee	a) Draft and revise the university charter and its modification, provide suggestions and advice; b) Create report regarding the development planning of the university, the establishment of the faculty, teaching reforms, campus construction, and other important reforms and resolutions, provide advice and suggestions; c) Create report showing annual overall performance of the university, the implementation of the budget, and the work of the Teachers' Union

What we have not yet explored, though, is whether the actual beneficiaries of enhanced autonomy inside universities (university presidents) feel empowered by these reforms. More specifically, do university presidents feel able to use and enact the devolved powers they have been granted? Drawing on the governance and new institutionalism literatures, we surmised that the beneficiaries might be reluctant to enact the formal powers granted to them for fear that in doing so they might violate established norms and expectations and incur a backlash (H2). In order to ascertain this, we consider the views and every-day experiences of senior university administrators.

University Presidents: Caught between a Rock and a Hard Place

China's university governance system is arguably rather peculiar. For example, central government is represented at all levels, including the lowest level, and one would expect this to enable central government influence to penetrate deep into the organization, thereby severely constraining the scope for autonomy. University presidents are also represented at all levels. It might therefore be tempting to conclude that presidents have the formal capacity to influence decisions at all these levels. But this would be to overlook the possibility that presidents' autonomy may be constrained by the omnipresence of central government. We could, of course, speculate about these governance dynamics. Whether university presidents *perceive* the reforms as genuinely expanding their autonomy is an empirical question, and one that cannot be answered by analysing the design features of the Chinese tertiary education governance system. A better method to ascertain this, so we reasoned, would be semi-structured interviews with university presidents and Party secretaries.

Qualitative Research Design and Methods

China currently has approximately 1,242 tertiary education institutions offering undergraduate programmes. Approximately 813 universities have been earmarked as centres for advanced teaching and research and are able to award postgraduate degrees. Of these, 111 are national (the top tier), 501 are provincial and 201 are prefecture-level institutions.

To ensure representativeness, we sought to recruit presidents and Party secretaries from all three levels of university, at approximately a 1:5:2 ratio (reflecting the size of each category). Accordingly, we sent email invitations to seven national universities, 35 provincial universities and 14 prefecture-level universities (56 in total). We received no responses so we then decided to send a repeat email invitation to 50 universities (seven national, 35 provincial and eight prefecture-level universities). The rationale for lowering the number of prefecture-level universities in this second round was because it became clear that academics in prefecture-level universities play a less prominent role in university administration. This time we used a high-profile figure from one of the top universities in

the country as an intermediary. This increased the response rate significantly and we received 43 responses, all of which were from presidents. Of these 43, 28 indicated that they were unable to participate owing to other commitments, while 15 were happy to be interviewed anonymously.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted approximately two hours. Participants were informed that the research was aimed at examining changes in university autonomy, so as to ensure participants were granted equal opportunity to express positive and negative views. Interviewees were given written assurances (via email) that their participation would remain confidential and anonymous. Of the 15 university presidents we interviewed, five were from national top-tier universities, which are overseen directly by the Ministry of Education. The ten other presidents were from provincial universities.

Four of the presidents we interviewed had been appointed by central government, six had been promoted internally, and five had been recruited from similar positions in other universities. The interviews were semi-structured, recorded and transcribed in full. Participants were asked the following three questions: (1) To what extent has government devolved decision-making power downwards to universities? (2) What decision-making discretion do the various university bodies have? (3) Thinking of day-to-day management, which institutions have the most (least) decision-making power?

To ensure accuracy, a forward-and-backward translation strategy was used, with the first author translating the transcripts into English, and an independent Chinese native speaker translating the transcripts back into Chinese. The original and back-translated versions were then compared for consistency, and corrected to ensure accurate English grammar and expression. The interview transcripts were analysed using Nvivo 10 text analysis software and included open, axial and selective data coding strategies.[28] Peer debriefing was used as a means to triangulate our findings and to optimize trustworthiness. This method enabled us to contrast the findings of our analyses of formal reforms with perceptions regarding the practical significance of these reforms.

We also approached 15 university Party secretaries, via email, with the same three questions. The Party secretaries were from the same institutions as the presidents we interviewed, and we followed the same procedures to record and analyse responses. We were then able to compare and contrast the views of those charged with overseeing the universities with the views of those responsible for the running of day-to-day affairs.

We are aware that 15 participants in each category is too small a sample to allow for the reaching of any strong conclusions about a sector consisting of 580 universities. However, that it was so difficult to recruit participants for a study of views about university governance is interesting in itself as it may reflect widespread reluctance to share negative views about university governance and

28 Corbin and Strauss 2008; Krippendorff and Bock 2008; Roberts 1997; Weber 1990.

university autonomy. Although we cannot be sure, when considering the responses of our participants, this seems plausible.

University Party Secretaries' Views on Hierarchy and Autonomy

We received responses from all 15 of the Party secretaries we contacted. Of these, eight merely acknowledged that devolution had taken place, reiterating the formal roles and responsibilities of different organizational units and refraining from any evaluation of central government involvement. The other seven interviewees did comment about the role of central government and explained that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to govern the tertiary education sector in a top-down manner. As the following extracts illustrate, rather than describe continuing government oversight as a problem, these seven respondents went to considerable lengths to explain and/or justify government oversight:

The [Party] has absolute leadership over the university … In fact, the CCP leads all organizations in China. (Participant S3)

We have inherited the excellent tradition of our CCP [which] extends the branch of the Party Committee to lower-level units, in companies, in the military. Accordingly, we have accumulated excellent experience managing higher education institutions. (Participant S14)

Two participants observed that in China leadership is considered to be a collective responsibility, thereby underscoring the importance of obedience and compliance as factors enabling the system to function:

The president takes the main responsibility for administering the university, and the Party Committee leads him … The president takes overall responsibility for managing the day-to-day affairs, such as teaching and research. It's a system of group leadership. (Participant S13)

We use certain criteria when evaluating students' academic and ideological performance, and draw top performers into the Party. We recommend excellent students to governmental departments, or recruit them as student advisors. [We value] capable and obedient students because they work efficiently, and they meet our expectations. (Participant S14)

Two Party secretaries defended ongoing Party involvement and oversight, arguing this was required in order to be able to fend off external threats:

We are vigilant … We have students from remote autonomous regions with distinct cultural and religious backgrounds … We use different approaches to maintain order on campus, and – more importantly – to plant the right seeds in these minority regions [and to strengthen] support for the central government. (Participant S2)

The West, led by the US, has been waging a war of peaceful transformation on us, hoping to change our nation's regime. As a result, we need to be vigilant and monitor the ways through which the West hopes to attack … The ideological war between us is always on, and can be a matter of life or death for our regime. (Interviewee S11)

Some participants alluded to the scope for conflict between administrators. However, as the following extracts illustrate, the Party secretaries we interviewed tended to characterize the governance system as a well-oiled machine that enabled the CCP to monitor compliance with Party ideology at all levels:

We manage the cadres, including promotions and appointments [and take into account] whether cadidates are equipped with strong standpoints, and [whether they are able to] advocate and uphold our Chinese brand of socialism. (Participant S4)

The Party secretaries had little difficulty in justifying continuing Party oversight. However, as the following extracts illustrate, their responses to questions about reforms to enhance the autonomy of those responsible for the day-to-day running of universities (presidents, deans and directors) were more ambivalent:

Autonomy is relative … Previously, universities were under the absolute control of the government, like supervised children. However, more recently we have been granted considerable autonomy in running university affairs. That said, we are still under the control of the party-state, and in that sense our autonomy differs considerably from that granted to universities in the West. (Participant S2)

The system is complex … It is not always clear who is boss, the president or the CCP … Sometimes the president is more powerful than the secretary; sometimes it's the other way around. (Participant S7)

In sum, it would seem from our interviews that university Party secretaries consider obedience, compliance and ideological unity (rather than devolution and de-administration) as essential for the survival of the tertiary education governance system, and that they are therefore happy to toe the Party line and to justify continuing government oversight/control in the sector. As we show next, this is not a view shared by university presidents, who share responsibility for the day-to-day management of Chinese universities.[29]

University Presidents' Views on Hierarchy and Autonomy

Debates on governance reform commonly question whether devolution should be regarded as substantive and meaningful, or as a symbolic gesture. Drawing on the governance, metagovernance and new-institutionalism literatures, which all emphasize the many informal ways in which power is exerted and perpetuated in institutional settings, we hypothesized that established norms, expectations and routines would run counter to devolution and constrain the extent to which university officials feel able to exercise the authority bestowed upon them (H2).

In other words, we expected to encounter a discrepancy between the formal/legal right to self-govern particular domains and the willingness to exercise this formal/legal prerogative. Our analysis of interview transcripts revealed nine specific themes (see Table 4), which, when put together, paint a rather gloomy picture and suggest that, in the eyes of university presidents, autonomy enhancing reforms have been largely symbolic and have had little real impact.

As can be seen from Table 4, some themes were more prevalent than others. Below, we provide verbatim quotations to illustrate the kinds of concerns expressed by university presidents.

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29 In China, university presidents, deans and directors are responsible for the day-to-day management of universities. We initially intended to interview representatives from all three levels; however, we decided to focus on university presidents after discovering that deans and directors were reluctant to participate.

Table 4: **Themes Emerging from Interviews with University Presidents**

	Theme 1 Concerned about institutional inertia	Theme 2 Concerned about internal power struggles	Theme 3 Concerned about external power struggles	Theme 4 Reluctant to take initiative fearing career backlash	Theme 5 Reluctant to take initiative fearing funding backlash	Theme 6 Viewing loyalty checks as control mechanism	Theme 7 Viewing appointment process as control mechanism	Theme 8 Concerned about lack of university autonomy	Theme 9 Viewing "autonomy" as symbolic rather than substantive
P1		√	√	√		√	√	√	√
P2	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
P3	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
P4		√			√		√	√	√
P5	√	√	√	√		√			
P6		√			√	√	√		
P7		√				√		√	
P8	√	√		√	√	√		√	
P9		√			√	√	√		
P10		√						√	
P11		√	√		√	√	√		√
P12			√		√	√	√	√	√
P13	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√
P14	√	√	√	√			√		
P15	√	√	√	√		√	√		√

Theme 1 – institutional inertia

Seven of the presidents we interviewed voiced their concerns about having to work in a system in which it is risky to take the initiative. As the following extract shows, university presidents are reluctant to propose change for fear that their proposals might not be well received by their superiors:

We dare not launch plans to remove obsolete systems. First, we need to consider the attitude of the government … and if we ask and don't get approval, then we won't carry out the proposed reform, as this would endanger our careers. (Participant P8)

Some of the interviewees spoke about institutional inertia and the challenge of having to navigate an ambivalent, unpredictable governance system:

The official guidelines stipulate that university presidents are responsible, under the guidance of the Party Committee of the university. Thus, who is in charge, the Party secretary or the president? (Participant P13)

This division of labour between two layers, the Party secretary and the president, has bad consequences [because] we do not know what to focus on. (Participant P14)

Theme 2 – internal power struggles

Interestingly, all 15 university presidents expressed concern about internal power struggles. As the following extracts show, this was an important reason why university presidents refrained from proposing changes:

In public, the Party secretary reassured me he would support my work. However, when I planned to implement my reform proposal, he warned me and told me my plan was running counter to the "Interim measures of administration of leaders of higher education institutions" (Participant P8)

The Party secretary in my university is aggressive and power hungry … It creates tension between us [and] this has encumbered my ability to implement the policies I deem suitable for our university … The Party secretary seems to do all he can to undermine my leadership. (Participant P13)

Theme 3 – external power struggles

Eleven of the presidents were concerned about external power struggles and were eager to avoid open conflict with senior officials in charge of funding decisions:

To secure government funding, we have to compete with other universities, and avoid upsetting our counterparts … This means we need to know who is the boss in government, who takes the decisions, because everyone is after extra resources … At the same time, we do our best to avoid getting dragged into power struggles inside the government, because this creates extra uncertainty. (Participant P1)

There is a precarious relationship between us and the government officials. You know, we depend on the government and its resources. Thus, every government official we encounter is our master. We dare not offend any of them … Who knows what will happen to us if we did! (Participant P3)

Theme 4 – avoid taking the initiative in order to protect career

Ten interviewees indicated that they were reluctant to initiate new proposals in case there were negative repercussions for their careers. As one participant explained:

It's like a game. When I want to do something, I will definitely impact another person's interests. Those affected are likely to report to government that I am disrupting the university. Then my official career may come to an end, or I may get demoted. It's safer to do nothing. (Participant P8)

Some presidents explained that the key to career success was pleasing both superiors and subordinates:

The secret to being an effective cadre in my university is to maintain a good relationship with the upper levels and to please subordinates. Most employees only care about their own interests [and] to gain their support, you need to increase their well-being. That's how I managed to climb to this position. (Participant P11)

Theme 5 – avoid taking the initiative in order to protect funding

Ten of the presidents indicated that they were reluctant to initiate changes or reforms in case doing so jeopardized university funding:

In reality, we are very careful with reform proposals. We are not sure which significant person we may offend. The human relationship network is very complicated. What we do may jeopardize someone else's plans, and this person may be a relative of an important government official who is responsible for the budget we get as a university. (Participant P2)

To be honest, we don't want stir things up. Generally, a reform initiative tends to affect some employees negatively. We know government is very worried about instability in our university [and] if someone got hurt in the reform process and they reported what happened inside our university, I could be criticized and they could cut the amount of government funding we receive. (Participant P13)

Theme 6 – loyalty checks as control mechanism

Thirteen presidents voiced their fears about loyalty checks and about being regarded as not displaying enough respect for their superiors and/or Party ideology:

It's funny. When we talk to the ideological superiors in the government, we can't reveal any negative thought to them, in case they form a negative image of us. Thus, we try to speak as little as we can. (Participant P5)

Nowadays, with the government strengthening its ideological control at university, we feel it's a must not to violate relevant regulations. We may have academic freedom, but this is a forbidden area. Thus, we constantly warn people on campus not to cross the line by saying things that run counter to the ideas of the central government and the country's president. (Participant P11)

Theme 7 – the appointment process as control mechanism

Twelve of the president interviewees were concerned about the appointment process, which they viewed as being driven by loyalty checks rather than based on merit and track record. The presidents perceived this process to be flawed and believed it created scope for ambitious colleagues to challenge their position:

To my disappointment, one faculty member sent a public email to the university severely scolding me for my behaviour and for deviating from what the predecessor did. He criticized me for

everything I did and made it clear that, in his eyes, I was not meeting the expectation associated with this position. (Participant P6)

Generally, the newly appointed president will be compared with their predecessor, and if the newly appointed president is not as good as their predecessor, they will be challenged. (Participant P10)

Those promoted to the position of university president from within the organization recognized that their promotion came as a surprise, and admitted that it created awkward social situations:

Now, my former leaders have become my subordinates who know me well. Initially, it felt a little awkward to work with each other, and it took us some time to adjust to this new relationship. (Participant P14)

Theme 8 – lack of university autonomy

Eight presidents voiced their concerns about university autonomy. At times, this concern was articulated explicitly; at other times, it was expressed indirectly using analogies:

Actually, we are dancers with chains on our legs. The purpose of state reforms is to devolve authority downwards and to give us greater autonomy. In real life, we dare not fight with the government even for the power we have been legally endowed with. (Participant 2)

Autonomy is a real challenge for us. (Participant P7)

In actual fact, the autonomy of us presidents is proportional with the status of our university in the hierarchy … The more prestigious your university is, the more privileges your university has. (Participant P10)

Autonomy is relative. We are generally aware where the boundary is … This autonomy is given and stipulated by the government. Actually, unlike our Western counterparts, we are not endowed with the power to make our own charters and by-laws. (Participant P13)

Of the eight presidents who felt that China's universities enjoyed limited autonomy, two were of the view that a lack of autonomy constrained academic freedom. According to one interviewee:

Autonomy is indeed a challenge. For example, our university had plans to reform the curriculum … However, when talking to the upper-level government, they showed some unusual vigilance and warned us not to go against mainstream ideology. Consequently, we gave up on the reform completely. (Participant P12)

Theme 9 – scepticism about devolution

Of the 15 university presidents interviewed, 12 were sceptical about reforms to enhance university autonomy. As the following extracts show, rather than discuss the actual reforms, university presidents gave examples of ways in which government continued to exert control over university affairs:

I know peer review is popular in the West, but it doesn't exist here. We are dominated by the administrators. And to be honest, I know peer review is better than reviews by university administrators. However, it is entrenched, and we seem reluctant to hand this power over to academicians. (Participant P2)

To be honest, I am ambitious and hope to launch a series of reforms to enhance teaching and research at my university. However, when I negotiated with the government officials, I was told I had to abide by the relevant regulations. This was very frustrating. (Participant P5)

This year, I wanted to promote the use of original English versions of textbooks. [However] I was warned by government officials not to go against mainstream ideology. (Participant P7)

I wanted to use my power independently, but I found out my hands were chained. (Participant P11)

We are always aware of our status. We are servants and subordinates and the government is our master. Government is too powerful [and] our promotion and careers are under its control. (Participant P13)

Those who take the initiative tend to be punished … and those who do nothing get promoted. (Participant P15)

Interestingly, the university presidents appeared to view the governing bodies they themselves oversee as also enjoying little actual autonomy. As one president put it:

I found handling the Academic Committee very easy. First, it is under our control. The chair is held by one vice-president, one of our subordinates. Second, other key members of the Academic Committee need our approval. In other words, we provide the membership of the Academic Committee with its legitimacy. (Participant P5)

Some of the presidents even complained about their subordinates, portraying them as having too many demands and as being a source of stress:

Every year, when the conference is approaching, I get a little headache. There are many representatives and they all want something … They tend to complain bitterly that we don't care about their well-being … The conference has developed into a platform for employees to voice their concerns. (Participant P4)

As the last extract illustrates, although university presidents complained about their own lack of freedom and autonomy, they were at times critical of their subordinates' demands, seemingly forgetting that their subordinates may also be experiencing similar frustrations regarding their own autonomy.

Discussion

We began this paper with an overview of Chinese tertiary education reforms, designed and introduced to increased universities' autonomy. We subsequently described the design of the standard system used to govern Chinese universities and saw that, like most university governance systems in the West, it is organized hierarchically, with clear levels and lines of command. What sets the Chinese system apart from its Western counterpart, though, is the presence of state authority, all the way down to the lowest operational level. As Min Wang and colleagues observe in their research into the "de-administration" of Chinese vocational training, Party influence permeates all levels and "a college becomes an extension department of the executive branch of government, while the government performs governance through executive orders that form direct administrative intervention."[30] Our findings suggest that the same can be said about China's universities and university faculties.

30 Wang, Min, et al. 2015, 2.

We then asked whether the reforms that have been introduced to enhance autonomy have had their intended effect of giving universities more actual say in the running of their own affairs. We hypothesized that "soft" factors (for example, norms, customs, habits, expectations, role perceptions and routinized practices) would prevent university presidents from enacting the devolved powers they have been granted formally. More specifically, we proposed that these reforms may have increased the formal/legal autonomy of universities but university administrators are reluctant to exercise these new powers for fear of incurring negative repercussions.

We articulated these propositions as two hypotheses, to enhance conceptual clarity, even though our analysis relied on existing documentation rather than our own primary data to support our first proposition. Our second, more ambitious hypothesis predicted that autonomy enhancing reforms are being rendered ineffective by informal norms, practices and control mechanisms, producing a situation in which the central government retains the control and capacity to "meta-govern."[31]

Our findings would seem to confirm our hypotheses. More specifically, we found that university Party secretaries continue to justify government oversight, while university presidents complain about an absence of genuine autonomy. We also found that there remains a considerable gap between formal and perceived autonomy, and that university presidents continue to feel overwhelmed by informal pressures and expectations. Indeed, from this perspective, it seems justified to argue that reforms to enhance autonomy have had little real impact on the ground; Chinese universities are still operating "in the shadow of hierarchy."[32]

This finding is arguably not new and chimes well with the conclusions of the "de-administration" literature that there is a persistent lack of autonomy in China's tertiary education sectors.[33] However, studies gauging the actual views of university administrators are few and far between,[34] and it remains unclear exactly *why* formal reforms have not been realized in reality. Through our interviews with university administrators, we were able to discern a number of contributing factors.

First, we found that administrators at different levels continue to have different understandings of where authority should be located, and this creates a climate of uncertainty for lower-ranked administrators (in this case, university presidents) who are uncertain as to which powers have actually been devolved. Second and following on from this, our findings show that, under such conditions, risk aversion and norm compliance have become the *modus operandi* for lower-ranking administrators. Hence, it is not surprising that university presidents,

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31 Bell and Hindmoor 2009; Hysing 2009; Jessop 1997, Koch 2013; Marinetto 2003; Sørensen and Torfing 2009.
32 Jessop 1997.
33 Bie and Feng 2011; Miao 2015; Hayhoe et al. 2012; Chen 2010; Tan and Yin 2013; Wang, Bao Xi, and Tao 2016; Yang, Rui, Vidovich and Currie 2007.
34 For exceptions, see Wang, Bao Xi, and Tao 2016; Yang, Rui, Vidovich and Currie 2007.

concernced about being seen as unnecessarily "rocking the boat," choose to act in accordance with what they perceive to be the norms and expectations of their superiors.

Conclusion

When considering the long list of reforms aimed at modernizing China's tertiary education system, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the central government has begun to loosen its grip on the sector and that China's universities have indeed gained some capacity to self-govern. However, the many *informal* ways in which power and influence are exerted and perpetuated in universities, as well as the many *informal* pressures facing university presidents, mean that university presidents feel unable to exercise the new powers that they have been granted.

Rather than conclude that China's universities lack autonomy (and describe the various reforms as merely symbolic), it makes more sense to view the current state of affairs as a metagovernance arrangement, with universities enjoying a modest degree of formal autonomy, but government retaining ultimate control/ oversight. Not only does central government determine the parameters of formal devolution, it also sets the informal norms used to judge the appropriateness of subordinates' behaviour. What should also not be forgotten is the possibility of devolution going into reversal, with government gradually clawing back control. As researchers have shown, China has begun to recentralize environmental governance, and it is hence pertinent to ask whether China's tertiary education sector is undergoing a similar transformation.[35]

As shown above, university presidents fear that enacting devolved powers would be viewed by superiors as disrespectful or as a betrayal of the Party and Party ideology. Certainly, it is unclear from our analysis whether those in power actively cultivate or exploit such fears. However, it is nonetheless clear that university presidents operate under the presumption that their behaviour will be judged against these normative criteria rather than against formal rules and regulations.

In sum, the Chinese government has introduced a rather impressive series of reforms to enhance universities' capacity to self-govern.[36] However, university presidents seem unconvinced and fear central government might retaliate if they seek to enact the devolved powers bestowed upon them. In our view this is unfortunate. However, we hope that by airing these concerns, this paper will stimulate debate about the ways in which the Chinese government could address the issue. This may be a tough challenge. As Dali Yang observes, "the Chinese state may have abandoned its Maoist totalistic orientation, but in some aspects we may still see some of this old streak."[37]

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35 Kostka and Nahm 2017.
36 Li, Lixu 2004; Pepper 2000; Mok 2005; 2009; 2013.
37 Yang, Dali 2004, 290.

As the saying goes, "old habits die hard," and it may be difficult for governments (and humans more generally) to relinquish control. However, as Herman Hesse famously observed, at times it is letting go rather than holding on that makes us strong. This insight chimes well with findings generated in social and organizational psychology research which show that employees whose autonomy is being taken away are likely to display recalcitrant "reactance" behaviour.[38] They become motivated by extrinsic rewards (for example, salary, bonuses) rather than intrinsic motivation (for example, passion for the job), and thus are less motivated to work towards collective goals.[39] Indeed, from that perspective it can, paradoxically, be in an organization's own best interest to devolve authority to employees, and costly to deny them otherwise.

Finally, it may be good to reflect briefly on the future of public administration research focusing on China. As several authors have noted, Chinese public administration research only began in earnest in the 1980s and is still catching up.[40] One of the tasks facing Chinese public administration researchers – and this also applies to researchers examining de-administration in tertiary education – is to increase analytical rigour.[41] And, from that perspective, it makes perfect sense to argue that measurement matters.[42] However, as this paper shows and as governance scholars have argued, informal everyday lived experiences matter just as much in research into power relations in governance and public policy settings.[43] It therefore makes sense to argue that measurement and interpretation both matter.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

We are aware that our research has limitations. For example, our sample sizes are small, and our study may not reflect the diversity in organizational cultures across different universities. Our research could be expanded upon in different ways. First and most obviously, a wider range of universities and stakeholders needs to be included in any study to generate more robust empirical evidence. Second, further research would benefit from a more in-depth investigation of perceptions and motivations. For example, it might be useful to ascertain whether Party secretaries and other Party representatives consciously use normative pressure to retain control over subordinates, or whether they are in actual fact more relaxed about loosening their grip than university presidents think.

Likewise, it might be useful to study role perceptions more systematically, this because university administrators are sandwiched between superiors and subordinates. Participants in our study expressed contradictory views and attitudes – a

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38 Brehm and Brehm 2013.
39 Deci, Koestner and Ryan 1999.
40 Wu, He and Sun 2013; Su, Walker and Xue 2013.
41 Su, Walker and Xue 2013.
42 Ibid., 258.
43 Bevir, Rhodes and Weller 2003; Rhodes 2002.

phenomenon described in psychology as "cognitive dissonance"[44] – with some presidents describing their superiors as being unresponsive to their demands, while portraying those below them as having unreasonable demands. In our view, it is worth examining such cognitive dissonance effects, not least because this might provide a better understanding of why hierarchical governance systems, in China and elsewhere, are often so unpopular but at the same time so difficult to change.

Acknowledgements

Biographical notes

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摘要: 中国政府认识到要创建世界一流大学需要给大学授予一定程度自主权, 但是为实现这一目标的改革与中国传统的政府治理模式背道而驰, 这里呈现的问题是政府到底授予大学多大的自主权? 本论文采访了目前在职的中国大学校长和党委书记, 基于这些质性数据我们判定中国大学不但仍然行驶在统治阶级的阴影下, 而且更为重要的是即使形式上政府有授权也被实际上大学行政层面非正式的压力和控制机制所抵消。最后讨论反思了中国公共治理研究目前的状态, 同时我们鼓励目前中国公共政策的研究者研究中国政府给管辖机构授权时要把正式的改革和相关行政官员每天鲜活的治理活动都考虑进去。

关键词: 中国; 高等教育改革; 治理; 元治理

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44 Festinger 1962.

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