**Perspectives on governance in Chinese universities**

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[Preliminaries]

I must begin by acknowledging the work of Wen Wen, my collaborator in the inquiry into this topic inquiry, who is more insightful than myself.

So, to begin.

For Rui Yang (2022), an abiding feature of Chinese culture is its capacity to take in multiple elements and develop new combinations. This is different to the Euro-American habit of singular, universalising frameworks and methods. Yang sees Chinese universities as creatively fusing indigenous and Euro-American elements. Despite its tensions this is a remarkable achievement. In future the capacity for cultural fusion will enable Chinese universities ‘to bring into the global community aspects of their rich educational and cultural heritage’ - providing they engage with that heritage. Only when Chinese universities reach their own deep roots can they achieve ‘luxuriant leaves’ (Yang 2011) and make their distinctive contribution. Then, perhaps, we can identify a Chinese ‘Idea of the University’.

The argument I will make today is that contemporary Chinese higher education, while derivative from the West in epistemic organisation and institutional models, is already distinctive in relation to governance. This has been shaped by Chinese statecraft and Confucian self-cultivation, plus twentieth century Leninism from Russia, neoliberal modernisation and the new public management. The point is that the East-West reconciliation is China-determined. ‘The emphasis on agency and diversity is essential to understand the Chinese reinvention of tradition in a context of global modernity’ (Muhlhahn 2019, p. 350).

So what are the distinctive features of higher education governance? That depends on how we see it. Western lenses, applied to China, are not enough. Let me cite two examples.

In a 2018 comparison of 20 higher education systems Shin and Kim (2018, pp. 232-233) establish three categories in relation to governance. The first is ‘collegial governance’ where managers control finance and personnel but faculty are supreme in other domains. This includes only Japan, Taiwan and Finland. In the second group, ‘managerial governance’, managers are the main actors but faculty have some influence. This includes the Anglophone and most European systems, Brazil and Argentina, and South Korea and Hong Kong SAR. The third category ‘bureaucratic governance’ is characterized by ‘strong managerial power with state influence and minimal influence from academics’ and ‘strong top-down decision-making’. This is Mexico, Malaysia and China. But can all systems be validly arranged on a single grid on the basis of fixed criteria? Is the role of government in higher education a constant that differs only in quantity? Are grass-roots power and top-down decision-making power always zero-sum? Arguably, in the case of China’s higher education, *both* top down direction and control *and* bottom up devolution have been highly developed.

My second example is an argument made by Harvard political scientist Elizabeth Perry (2020). For Perry the fundamental explanatory categories are the ideological distinction between free democracy and authoritarianism. Perry lumps Russia, the Gulf States and North Korea in with China. Yet the contexts, systems and outcomes are different. None have built higher education and science as China has done. Perry acknowledges that it is not necessary to be a liberal democracy to have flourishing higher education institutions. She is right but for the wrong reasons. ‘As in the imperial past’, states Perry, authoritarian rule in China today is buttressed by a pattern of educated acquiescence, with academia acceding to political compliance in exchange for the many benefits conferred on it by the state’ (p. 1). One sign of this ‘political compliance’, she says, is that ‘faculty are urged to prepare policy papers for submission to party and government agencies’ (p. 15). In Perry’s eyes this function, which is seen as a virtuous public service in the US and other systems all over the world, becomes sinister when the receiving government is a communist party-state.

So the further the distance between a given higher education system and the US system, the more the former is in deficit. This narcissist framing, which is very familiar to us, perpetuates the old unequal global order. As Muhlhahn (2019) remarks: ‘Constructing and upholding difference between the Westerners and the Chinese, or between the centre and the periphery, has long been identified as a key tenet of colonial rule’ (p. 105).

A hundred years ago John Dewey the foremost Euro-American philosopher of education in the twentieth century, visited China from 1919 to 1921. At the end of this prolonged experience John Dewey concluded that ‘China can be understood only in terms of the institutions and ideas which have been worked out in its own historical evolution’; and Chinese politics ‘has to be understood in terms of itself’, not translated into an ‘alien’ political classification (Wang 2007, p. 76). Likewise, Harvard historian John Firbank stated that ‘our first requirement, then, if we are to understand China, is to try to avoid imposing a European scale of judgment’ (Firbank and Goldman 2006, p. 47). Ka Ho Mok (2021) states that ‘the conceptual tools adopted from international literature with very different historical, institutional and political orientations would not be appropriate for analysing the unique state-education market and university relationships in China’.

In the remainder of this paper I will argue five propositions:

1. China’s higher education can only be understood only in relation to the Sinic comprehensive state, which is qualitatively different to the Western state;
2. This state tradition in higher education is associated with a distinctive approach to devolution, and a long habit of using plural forms of authority;
3. Practices of intellectual freedom in China only partly intersect with Western academic freedom. Each is empowering but in different ways;
4. Nevertheless, there are special problems in the humanities and social sciences;
5. And there are overall tensions and limits in higher education governance.

First, the state. Western governance is rooted in divided powers and a state that is potent but limited. Western society is divided between government-as-state, the seat of political authority and holding a monopoly of violence (other than in the US); the economic market; public civil society including churches in a variable relation with the state; and the individual, who enjoys an ill-defined normative primacy. Within the state there is a further division between executive, legislature and judiciary. The authority of the law holds it all together. The boundary between the state and other spheres is contested, tense and unstable. The university has semi-autonomy, regulated by the state but part of the division of powers.

China’s governance tradition is that of a comprehensive state, not divided powers and a limited state. Government, politics and statecraft are supreme over all other domains including the economy, the military and civil society. The law in China is a tool of administration rather than being independent of central state power, so a separation of powers cannot take root. Except during the Republic from 1911 to 1949, in China’s long history there has been no discursive limit to the state and no rival authority has been permitted. Leninism reinforced the Imperial state by gaining an unprecedented capacity for grass roots intervention. In all sectors, including higher education, party networks and governmental institutions are closely intertwined, with leaders at each level often holding simultaneous appointments in both: hence the term ‘party-state’. However, the mandate of heaven, the Zhou dynasty compact whereby the state must sustain order and prosperity to retain the people’s consent, remains an unspoken part of political culture. The state typically oscillates between periods of openness and grass roots expression, and periods of tightening control and internal political closure. In the last forty years these oscillations have been marked.

Second, as well as centralisation, there is devolution and plural authority. The mechanisms evolved during the Imperial period and now take distinctive forms in higher education.

Leninism does not have a good worldwide track record as a stable mode of governance, but it has worked better in China because it has become hybridised with traditional imperial statecraft with its wealth of historical lessons and methods of how to manage a large and diverse country in which grass-roots initiative is inevitable and necessary. Following the rebellions in the borderlands under the Tang dynasty, the Song dynasty developed a localised political elite that was Academy trained and locally assigned from the centre of the state. Local officials depended on central support for career progression. ‘Localisation and the consolidation of unified imperial power appear to be positively correlated’ state Blockmans and de Weerdt. Sounds familiar. The approach continued under the Ming and Qing, and essentially is still in use.

In addition to centrally managed devolution, successive Imperial dynasties used dual structures of leadership, to pluralise the flow of information upward to the emperor and diminish the potential for concentrated power. Under the first Qin emperor each territorial commandery was headed by a governor but there was an imperial inspector to watch the governor. In the Song a military complex operated alongside the civil administration, each with different social origins and networks. The administrators tended to conservatism but the military officials were more capable of arbitrary action. Under the Ming the palace eunuchs ran a shadow administration alongside the civil service. Each informed on the other. The Qing dynasty used dual appointments. Manchu governors-general were paired with Chinese governors. They monitored one another’s adherence to central directives. A similar dual structure was found at lower levels of the bureaucracy. Meanwhile, censors reported to the emperor on both sets of officials. The dual leadership of today’s universities is simpler.

After Deng Xiaoping was restored to the party leadership in 1977 he moved quickly to depoliticise the universities and to establish the capacity for grass roots initiative. Deng emphasised that scientists should be fostered and regulated, not suppressed. It was enough that they were loyal to country and party. He established a new distribution of authority in which state control was counter-balanced by scientific expertise in directing the work. This laid the basis for today’s dual system of governance. Deng supported the maximum devolution and democratisation consistent, of course, with maintenance of party control.

Both top-down power and grass roots initiative have been crucial to the exceptional development of higher education and science in China. Top-down control integrated higher education into the machinery of state so that it was lifted up by China’s economic trajectory, while continuous improvement was systematically fostered. Bottom-up agency enabled the accumulation of teaching and learning, scholarship and research, and international linkages that fed directly into research development unmediated by the state. Arguably, both parts of Deng’s formula, top-down and bottom-up, were equally essential and symbiotic.

As time went on, corporate forms of institutional devolution were introduced. In 1985 the central government stepped back from direct management. Institutions gained more discretion in recruitment. In the 1998 Law on Higher Education they became a ‘legal person’. In 2010 the Ministry of Education enhanced the role of academic councils in disciplinary construction and academic evaluation. The administrative powers delegated to universities include teaching plans, curriculum development, and infrastructure. Institutions have also gained increased discretion in determining research priorities. As in the Anglophone West, the state has moved from direct control to facilitation. Government is no longer the only sponsor and provider but it has maintained ultimate control, as in the West.

Western analysis of China cannot always see this clearly. Through a Western lens, where the relation between state and universities is understood in zero sum terms and institutions can only have autonomy when they are separated from the state, there has been little change in China. Universities are still firmly nested in the state. In contrast a Chinese lens can readily identify the shift that has occurred, from close and direct national control in the 1950s to a more traditional Chinese devolution on the basis of regulated autonomy. Hayhoe (1996) states that the Euro-American category ‘institutional autonomy’ is inappropriate in China where the legal potential for separation is absent. The government-university relation is more accurately defined in terms of *zizhu,* meaning ‘self-mastery’.

Third, academic freedom. In the second half of the nineteenth century, with Chinese scholars returning from Japan and Western countries, they brought with them Euro-American ideas of ‘academic freedom’. In 1912, when Cai Yuanpei (later the president of Peking University) led the Ministry of Education, he drafted and promulgated regulations that laid down the basic principle of ‘professor governing university’ for the Chinese university system. However, ‘professor governing university’ lacked cultural and social foundations and encountered practical difficulties. After the CCP took power in 1949 it was replaced by the ‘system of president accountability’ and finally ‘president accountability under party secretary’s supervision’. Yet the absence of Western academic freedom does not mean the absence of scholarly freedom per se. Arguably, this has fluctuated greatly under the party-state, amid the oscillations between opening and closure, especially the turmoil of the Cultural Revolutions, but what has fluctuated has been freedom traditional to China.

Euro-American ideas of academic freedom are rooted in the unconstrained expression of independent expertise specific to the discipline, in a space free of direct state intervention, what Isiah Berlin calls ‘negative freedom’. Ruth Hayhoe argues that these ideas exercise some influence but on the whole are ‘not a good fit for China’ (Hayhoe 2011, p. 17). Arguably, in China, in the tradition of academic agency inherited from Imperial times, academic agency is primarily expressed within the state, not outside or against the state.

The location of scholars, academics and scientists within the state is associated with profound responsibility, a concurrent social standing, and the capacity to speak, be heard and secure effects. Hayhoe calls it ‘intellectual freedom’, as distinct from ‘academic freedom’. This is positive freedom in Berlin’s sense. It is not more or less than negative freedom. It is different.

There are differing limitations in each tradition. Western faculty express themselves openly in their field of expertise but are often ignored, critics on the sideline. Sinic faculty are more centrally positioned. What they say matters. However, while they have self-determination they do not have self-realisation. They must account for the effects of what they say, including, in China today, the implications for party-state rule. They have a larger scope for free expression behind closed doors, inside the party-state, than in the public arena or perhaps the classroom, where their scope for open expression is periodically restricted.

Fourth, there are special problems in the humanities and social sciences, where a multi-strand conversation challenges the Leninist monopoly of governmental ideas and ideologies. While social science faculty share the party-state’s commitment to national mission and social improvement, Leninist polities do not easily tolerate new theorisations and terminology. with ever-emerging new terminologies. As Shi and Wu put it, ‘the duty’ of the party secretary system in the universities ‘is to guarantee a mainstream ideological doctrine’ Likewise, the humanities and arts should offer a plurality of ideas about China and the world, but again, history and other humanities must inevitably play into national narratives. The problem is partly one of balance and nuance, but it also goes deeper and is hard to resolve.

Enabling epistemic diversity in the humanities and social sciences is crucial. Creative working with diversity is integral to Chinese intellectual life. The pluralisation of the humanities and social sciences would be no larger a step for the party-state than was Deng Xiaoping’s university devolution and grass-roots economic experimentation in the 1980s. It would enable the universities to more effectively tap into the vast intellectual resources of China’s knowledge, perspectives and imaginative forms, thereby multiplying the possible ‘Chinese characteristics’. More instrumentally, in much of the world the social sciences bring forward data, new ideas and criticisms, prior to government giving status to them, that contribute markedly to the evolution of government. The country needs to find ways to sustain the critical conversation at its edges of the party-state on a stable basis.

Fifth and finally, there are tensions within the Chinese mode of governance in higher education, paralleling partly different tensions in Western governance. Studies repeatedly suggest that the authority of faculty in China is being partly displaced by institutional administration, as is happening in other countries. This can inhibit the all important capacity of faculty to take grass roots initiatives. Some research, and anecdotal evidence, also report instances of conflict, slippage and disorganisation in the relations between university presidents and party secretaries. though in other cases the relation works well.

More fundamentally, the factor that allows the party-state to drive and coordinate higher education effectively, its organisational penetration at every level, is also a source of limitations. Leninist authority overhangs the institutions, threatening to inhibit practical ideas. University leaders can be suddenly changed. Institutions are required to remove references to freedom of thought from their charters, as at Fudan University in 2019. Instances of past suppression leads to ongoing self-censorship, yet intellectual work needs the fearless willingness to push boundaries. Amid the oscillations between opening and closing, long-term thinking and planning are inhibited. This cannot be good.

In 2012 Xi Jinping, then the President-designate, visited Tsinghua and Beida. He emphasised that training future leaders of the party-state was an essential role of the two institutions, a message attractive to them. He also stated there were limits on what faculty could discuss. There were seven ‘no’s’, forbidden topics, such as the past failures of the party-state, the promotion of constitutional democracy and a Western-style separation of powers, ‘universal values’ like human rights, freedoms of the press and civil society, the questioning of China’s reform and opening, and of socialism with Chinese characteristics As Muhlhahn remarks: ‘It is hard to overstate the impact these strictures had on academic discourse and the intellectual environment’ (Muhlhahn 2019, p. 565). In the last decade the closer political management of the universities might weakened their potential to contribute creatively to the all-important evolution of ‘Chinese characteristics’. This rests on the willingness to embrace diversity.

Let me move to conclusions. In *The Chinese idea of a university* Yang (2022) states that ‘Chinese societies will never be fully Westernised, nor should they be. Many foundational differences between Chinese and Western cultural values make it impossible to fully assimilate each other’ (p. 126). Notwithstanding the fact that universities all over the world share common elements, Chinese and Western universities will not become the same. This is fortunate. It has been a Western world in the last two hundred years and it is not travelling well. The primacy of the capitalist economy, the Anglophone gift to global history, is eroding our conditions of existence. We must move forward on the basis of the primacy of politics and the capacity to work together on the basis of diversity, *heer butong*. China is more advanced in those domains. Chinese universities can help us all to develop shared solutions.

The governance structure of higher education in China is unique and instructive. It is specific to China rather than a general model. It combines traditional dynastic statecraft with Leninist party-state organisation and selected elements of the Euro-American university. Institutions resemble Western models but their essence is distinct. There is a potent combination of top-down policies and funding and bottom-up agency with scope for initiative, and learning by ‘crossing the river by feeling the stones’. China’s higher education relies on the talents of teachers and researchers as well as university presidents and party secretaries. Despite tensions the level of trust between the party-state, university leaders and administrators, and faculty, is higher than in the Anglophone world. This is a precious resource, crucial to China.

The case of China shows that universities nested within the state can enhance their outcomes while maintaining a practical working autonomy, though the latter is not guaranteed. Self-mastery and the positive freedom of faculty have been associated with exceptional growth and continuous improvement. The system has worked because there is agreement between the state and faculty on essential purposes. The obvious danger is that the bottom-up capability of faculty could be undermined over time by a combination of tighter political controls, neoliberal homogeneity of outcomes, frenetic performativity, and the weakening of faculty in decision making about education and research matters. A movement in the opposite direction, towards plural conversation in the social sciences and humanities, enhancing the traditional capacity of China to embrace and work with diversity, would have the opposite effect, and could trigger the next level, a renaissance in the contributions of higher education.