Rethinking University Governance in China: A Theoretical Perspective on Autonomy and Accountability

Junxiu Liu [1, *]

[1] University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu 611731, China

*Corresponding Author
Junxiu Liu

lileihanmeimei168@outlook.com

Abstract

This study examines the evolving relationship between institutional autonomy and accountability in China's higher education system. Historically characterized by strong government coordination, Chinese universities have, in recent decades, experienced gradual expansion of decision-making authority in areas such as academic programs, personnel management, and resource allocation. Drawing on policy analysis and existing scholarship, this article adopts a conceptual and historical approach to explore contemporary governance arrangements. Using perspectives from governance theory and comparative higher education studies, the paper analyzes how autonomy and accountability are configured in the Chinese context. The findings suggest that universities have gained increased flexibility in academic and administrative practices, while public authorities continue to play an important role in guiding overall development priorities and ensuring alignment with broader societal goals. Recent reforms have introduced elements of performance-oriented governance, including competitive funding schemes and evaluation initiatives such as the "Double First-Class" program, which link institutional development with measurable outcomes. These mechanisms have contributed to improvements in research capacity and international competitiveness, while also reshaping institutional behavior and management practices. The study characterizes China's university governance as a hybrid model, combining expanded institutional discretion with structured oversight and evaluation frameworks. Looking ahead, further refinement of governance arrangements may involve strengthening institutional capacity, improving evaluation systems, and promoting a balanced focus on educational quality, innovation, and social relevance.

1. Introduction

China's higher education governance has undergone significant transformation, particularly over the past four decades of reform and opening. Historically, Chinese universities operated within a highly centralized administrative framework, with limited institutional discretion. Since the late 1970s, however, economic reform and increased global engagement have prompted efforts to "streamline the relationship between government, society and higher education institutions." Policy reforms have aimed to shift from direct administrative intervention toward a model of macro-level coordination, enabling universities to play a more active role in managing academic affairs in response to evolving societal needs. As a result, universities have gradually expanded their decision-making capacity in areas such as admissions, curriculum design, research agendas, and international cooperation. These developments are broadly consistent with global trends emphasizing institutional self-governance and academic innovation (Berdahl, 1990; Berdahl & Millett, 1991; Clark, 1983). Compared with the Soviet-influenced system of the 1950s–1970s, contemporary Chinese universities demonstrate a markedly higher degree of operational autonomy, at least in formal and procedural terms.

At the same time, the expansion of autonomy has been accompanied by the development of diversified accountability arrangements. Rather than a simple reduction of state involvement, governance reforms have involved a reconfiguration of the state's role. Public authorities continue to play a central coordinating function in higher education, shaping institutional development through policy guidance, resource allocation, and established governance structures. The prevailing model is often described as "the president's responsibility under the leadership of the Party Committee," a system institutionalized nationwide in the 1990s and reflective of longstanding governance traditions. Within this framework, university leadership structures are designed to ensure alignment between institutional development and broader policy orientations.

Scholarly research suggests that, while universities have gained greater flexibility in certain domains, public authorities continue to exert influence over key aspects of governance (Jiang & Li, 2016). In practice, major decisions—such as senior leadership appointments and large-scale financial allocations—are typically embedded within broader regulatory and approval processes. Consequently, the notion of autonomy in the Chinese context differs from models of full institutional independence commonly discussed in Western literature. Chinese universities operate within an integrated governance system, combining elements of institutional discretion with structured oversight.

From a theoretical perspective, China's experience reflects the enduring governance tension between autonomy and accountability (Berdahl & Millett, 1991). Existing scholarship suggests that greater institutional autonomy can foster innovation and academic development, while accountability mechanisms are often employed to ensure responsiveness to public interests and national priorities (Altbach et al., 2005). In the Chinese context, this balance is shaped by both cultural and institutional factors. Traditions emphasizing collective goals and coordinated governance coexist with reform-oriented policies that encourage universities to enhance efficiency and competitiveness in a global environment (Mok, 2016).

The resulting governance arrangement can be characterized as a hybrid model, incorporating elements of decentralization alongside continued macro-level coordination. In this sense, certain governance functions have been redistributed to institutions and market actors, consistent with what Jessop described as the "hollowing-out" of the state in broader governance transformations (Jessop, 1993). At the same time, the role of public authorities remains adaptive and context-dependent, particularly in relation to long-term development priorities.

Overall, China's higher education system reflects an ongoing effort to balance institutional initiative with coordinated governance, with the aim of supporting both innovation and alignment with broader societal objectives (Li, 2020; Xu, 2021). Against this backdrop, this article examines how this balance has been configured in practice, the dynamics it generates, and its implications for the theory and practice of university governance. The paper proceeds by outlining the research methodology, followed by an analysis of major governance reforms and their outcomes, and concludes with a discussion of their broader significance.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-informed approach to examine university governance in China. Rather than generating new quantitative data, the research is based on documentary analysis and a systematic review of relevant literature, including policy texts, legal documents, and scholarly studies. Key sources encompass national education policy frameworks (such as the 2010–2020 Education Reform Plan), higher education laws and regulations, university charter documents, and academic research on governance developments in China over the past decade. In addition, comparative insights from governance theory and international case studies are incorporated to enrich the analytical framework.

The analysis is structured with reference to Ball's modified "policy cycle" framework, which considers the interrelated dimensions of policy context, policy text, and policy practice. First, the study examines the context of influence by identifying the socio-economic and institutional factors shaping governance reforms, including processes such as globalization and higher education expansion. Second, it analyzes policy texts—namely major reform initiatives and regulatory instruments—to explore how concepts of autonomy and accountability are articulated. Third, it considers policy implementation by synthesizing findings from existing case studies and scholarly assessments of governance practices across institutions.

The use of multiple sources, including policy documents, academic analyses, and historical accounts, allows for triangulation of evidence and contributes to the robustness of the analysis. Methodologically, the study is primarily analytical and interpretive in nature. Instead of conducting primary data collection (e.g., interviews or surveys), it draws on established empirical research, including studies of faculty perspectives, institutional governance practices, and performance evaluation systems. For example, the analysis incorporates findings from case studies of universities in mainland China and Hong Kong, as well as data related to national evaluation initiatives such as the "Double First-Class" program.

By integrating policy analysis with existing empirical evidence, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and theoretically grounded understanding of contemporary university governance in China. The research also engages with relevant governance frameworks, including New Public Management, principal–agent theory, and culturally informed perspectives, to interpret the observed developments.

Given its conceptual orientation, the study focuses on analytical interpretation rather than hypothesis testing. Its primary objective is to examine how autonomy and accountability are structured within Chinese higher education and to contribute to broader theoretical discussions on governance in coordinated systems. While the analysis is based on publicly available information and established scholarship, the breadth and diversity of sources provide a solid foundation for the conclusions drawn.

3. Results

3.1. Expanded Autonomy in University Operations

Our analysis indicates that Chinese universities today operate with a significantly expanded scope of institutional autonomy compared to the early reform period of the 1980s. Reforms implemented since the 1990s have contributed to a gradual decentralization of administrative functions. For example, universities are now able to design curricula and academic programs with reduced direct administrative intervention from the Ministry of Education (MOE), while remaining aligned with national policy frameworks. Institutions have also developed greater flexibility in establishing new academic fields, creating research platforms, and engaging in international collaboration. In addition, universities have gained increased discretion in areas such as student admissions and faculty recruitment. The transition away from centrally assigned graduate employment has enabled institutions to adapt their programs more closely to evolving societal and labor market demands (Chen et al., 2021). From a financial perspective, while public funding remains a primary source of support, universities are able to mobilize supplementary resources through tuition, research funding, donations, and various forms of institutional engagement, thereby enhancing their operational capacity. Governance structures have also evolved, with many institutions establishing boards or advisory bodies that include representatives from industry and alumni networks, contributing to more diversified decision-making processes.

These developments are consistent with a shift toward what Clark (1983) conceptualizes as a rebalancing among the state, market, and academic oligarchy in the "triangle of coordination." Overall, Chinese higher education has experienced a notable expansion of substantive autonomy, particularly in relation to academic organization and internal management. At the same time, this autonomy operates within an established governance framework that provides overall policy guidance and coordination. Institutional decision-making is generally aligned with broader development priorities, and certain regulatory mechanisms continue to shape key processes. For instance, while universities exercise discretion in recruitment and promotion, these processes are

typically guided by nationally defined standards and priorities. Similarly, innovations in student admissions take place within an overarching quota system administered at the national level.

From a governance perspective, this suggests that Chinese universities have developed considerable procedural autonomy in implementing policies, while strategic directions remain coordinated at a broader level. Policy discourse often frames this arrangement in terms of building a "modern university system" with Chinese characteristics, emphasizing institutional management "according to law" alongside established governance structures. Previous research has noted this dual orientation (IIEP, 2014), and our findings are consistent with this interpretation. For example, revisions to university charters since 2016 have further clarified governance roles while also affirming academic responsibilities in teaching and research (Fitzgerald, 2020). In this sense, expanded operational autonomy coexists with structured governance arrangements, reflecting a key feature of recent reforms.

3.2. Strengthened Accountability Mechanisms

Alongside the expansion of institutional autonomy, governance reforms have also introduced a range of accountability mechanisms aimed at enhancing quality assurance and system coordination. One notable development is the increasing use of performance-based evaluation systems. Since the mid-1990s, national initiatives such as the University Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation have been implemented to assess educational quality across institutions. Subsequent frameworks, including various excellence-oriented evaluation programs, have further refined assessment criteria.

In particular, the "Double First-Class" initiative (launched in 2017) represents an important example of performance-oriented governance. Under this framework, selected universities and disciplines are supported in their pursuit of advanced academic standing, with progress periodically reviewed through structured evaluation processes. These mechanisms link institutional development with clearly defined performance indicators, thereby encouraging continuous improvement in research capacity and academic output. Empirical studies suggest that such evaluation systems have contributed to increases in research productivity and the international visibility of leading Chinese universities (Liu et al., 2023). At the institutional level, universities have responded by developing internal management practices that align with these evaluation frameworks, including the use of performance indicators and resource allocation mechanisms. While these approaches promote efficiency and goal alignment, existing research also notes the importance of maintaining a balanced emphasis on both quantitative indicators and broader educational objectives (Zhang & Li, 2025).

In addition to performance-based evaluation, accountability arrangements in Chinese higher education also encompass organizational and professional dimensions. Faculty evaluation systems typically include multiple components, such as teaching effectiveness, research contributions, and professional conduct, reflecting a comprehensive approach to academic development. Policy guidelines issued in recent years have emphasized the role of higher education institutions in fostering both academic excellence and broader educational values, highlighting the importance

of integrating teaching, research, and social responsibility (Fitzgerald, 2020). From a governance perspective, this indicates that accountability in China operates across multiple levels, including institutional performance, organizational coordination, and professional standards. University leadership structures play a key role in facilitating communication and alignment between institutional activities and broader policy frameworks (Jiang & Li, 2016). This multi-dimensional approach to accountability reflects the integration of managerial practices with established governance traditions.

In practice, Chinese universities have also adopted a range of mechanisms commonly associated with global higher education governance. For example, evaluation exercises and competitive funding schemes have introduced elements of performance-based resource allocation, while transparency initiatives—such as the publication of annual reports and financial audits—have strengthened institutional accountability to stakeholders. Many universities have established institutional research units and data systems to support evidence-based decision-making, reflecting the development of a more systematic approach to governance. These developments are often interpreted in relation to broader trends associated with New Public Management, which emphasize efficiency, evaluation, and organizational performance (Su, 2025). Overall, the evolution of accountability mechanisms has contributed to a governance framework in which universities operate with increased flexibility while engaging with structured evaluation and coordination processes. This combination of autonomy and accountability represents a defining characteristic of contemporary higher education governance in China.

3.3. Governance Outcomes and Ongoing Challenges

The combined effects of expanded institutional autonomy and strengthened accountability mechanisms have contributed to notable transformations in China's higher education system. In recent years, Chinese universities have achieved significant progress in terms of global visibility and academic performance, with a growing number of institutions appearing in leading international rankings. Increased flexibility in academic governance has enabled universities to develop new forms of institutional innovation, including interdisciplinary research platforms, entrepreneurship initiatives, and international collaborative programs, which have supported their broader development strategies. At the same time, accountability mechanisms have encouraged a stronger focus on quality enhancement and performance improvement. Evaluation systems at both national and institutional levels have provided incentives for universities to improve teaching standards, research output, and international engagement. Empirical studies indicate that student-related outcomes, such as employment prospects and levels of satisfaction, have shown positive trends in recent years, partly in connection with these governance arrangements (Chen et al., 2021; Grebennikov & Shah, 2013). In addition, the diversification of funding sources has encouraged universities to engage more actively with industry and society, thereby broadening their responsiveness to a wider range of stakeholders (Tight, 2019). These developments are consistent with broader policy objectives aimed at fostering a dynamic and internationally competitive higher education system that remains aligned with national development priorities (Wang, 2016).

At the same time, the evolving governance framework also highlights the importance of balancing different dimensions of institutional development. In particular, the increasing use of

quantitative indicators—such as publications, patents, and rankings—has raised discussions about how to integrate these measures with broader educational goals, including the cultivation of critical thinking, holistic development, and social responsibility. Some studies suggest that a strong emphasis on measurable performance indicators may influence institutional priorities and academic practices, underscoring the need for more comprehensive evaluation approaches (Tight, 2019; Wang & Liu, 2011). In addition, variations in institutional capacity across regions and types of universities suggest that governance arrangements may have differentiated effects. While research-intensive universities are often well positioned to respond to performance-based evaluation systems, other institutions may require more context-sensitive frameworks that take into account their specific missions and resource conditions. Recent policy developments indicate a growing awareness of this issue, with efforts to introduce more diversified evaluation criteria tailored to different categories of institutions (Xu, 2021). Continued refinement of these approaches may further support balanced system-wide development.

Another important dimension relates to the international engagement of Chinese universities. As institutions expand their global collaborations, differences in governance practices and academic expectations across systems may require ongoing dialogue and mutual understanding (Fitzgerald, 2020). In this context, enhancing institutional transparency, strengthening communication mechanisms, and promoting shared academic standards can contribute to more effective international partnerships. Overall, the current governance framework reflects a process of continuous adjustment, in which achievements in institutional development are accompanied by ongoing efforts to optimize coordination between autonomy and accountability. These developments highlight both the progress made in advancing higher education capacity and the importance of further refinement in governance practices. The findings presented here provide a foundation for examining the broader theoretical and practical implications of China's experience in university governance.

4. Discussion

The Chinese experience with university governance provides valuable insights for theoretical discussions on the relationship between autonomy and accountability in higher education. One important observation is the emergence of a hybrid governance model that does not fully align with conventional categorizations of either centralized control or complete institutional autonomy. In the Chinese context, universities operate with a degree of managerial and academic discretion in day-to-day activities, while remaining embedded within broader governance arrangements that provide strategic coordination. From a comparative perspective, this configuration shares similarities with what has been described as an "East Asian model" of higher education governance, in which public authorities continue to play an active role alongside expanding institutional autonomy (Mok, 2016). This suggests that autonomy and accountability can be understood not as mutually exclusive concepts, but as interrelated dimensions that may be configured in layered and context-specific ways. Chinese universities demonstrate a form of operational flexibility combined with coordinated strategic orientation, indicating that governance arrangements can be positioned along a continuum rather than framed as a binary opposition.

Such an interpretation contributes to ongoing theoretical debates by highlighting alternative pathways through which higher education systems can pursue both institutional initiative and broader societal alignment.

From the perspective of principal–agent theory, the relationship between public authorities and universities can be interpreted as one in which governance mechanisms are designed to align institutional activities with broader policy objectives. Instruments such as targeted funding, performance-based evaluations, and strategic initiatives (e.g., the "Double First-Class" program) can be viewed as efforts to structure incentives and support institutional development. These arrangements introduce elements of performance-oriented governance within an overarching coordination framework, contributing to improvements in organizational efficiency and academic output. At the same time, existing research suggests the importance of maintaining a balanced relationship between different forms of motivation and evaluation. In line with broader discussions in the literature on New Public Management, the interaction between performance incentives and academic practices highlights the need to consider both measurable outcomes and longer-term academic development. This perspective reinforces the idea that effective governance involves not only the design of incentive systems but also their alignment with the diverse functions of higher education institutions.

Another important dimension of discussion concerns the relationship between China's governance practices and broader notions of "good governance" in higher education. Commonly referenced principles—such as transparency, participation, effectiveness, and rule-based administration—provide a useful framework for comparative analysis. In recent years, China has introduced measures aimed at enhancing governance capacity, including clearer evaluation criteria, expanded institutional procedures, and the formalization of governance structures through legal frameworks such as the Higher Education Law (1998). At the same time, governance arrangements reflect a combination of formal institutional mechanisms and established administrative practices, resulting in a distinctive configuration that may not fully correspond to conventional models. This suggests that existing evaluative frameworks may benefit from contextual adaptation when applied to different governance environments. Rather than assessing systems solely against a single normative standard, it may be more appropriate to consider how governance principles are interpreted and implemented within specific institutional and cultural settings. In this regard, the Chinese case highlights the importance of examining governance quality through a context-sensitive lens.

The findings of this study also resonate with Jun Li's conceptualization of the "Zhong-Yong model" or Chinese University 3.0, which emphasizes a culturally informed approach to institutional autonomy (Li, 2020). Within this framework, universities are understood as exercising self-regulation in their internal operations while contributing to broader societal and developmental objectives. This perspective reflects a balance between institutional initiative and coordinated orientation, consistent with the Confucian concept of moderation (Zhong-Yong). From this viewpoint, Chinese universities can be seen as pursuing academic development within a governance structure that emphasizes both institutional capacity and societal relevance. The rapid advancement of Chinese higher education in recent decades suggests that this model has

supported significant progress in research, innovation, and system expansion. At the same time, ongoing discussions in the literature indicate the importance of continuously refining governance arrangements to accommodate evolving domestic and international contexts. In an increasingly globalized higher education environment, issues related to international collaboration and academic exchange further highlight the relevance of governance alignment across systems. Differences in institutional practices and expectations may require ongoing dialogue and mutual adaptation, particularly as Chinese universities expand their global engagement (Fitzgerald, 2020). Strengthening communication mechanisms and fostering shared understandings can contribute to more effective international cooperation.

Finally, the Chinese case offers broader implications for governance theory and policy development. One key insight is the importance of adopting a multi-dimensional approach to accountability, encompassing not only performance indicators but also educational quality, institutional diversity, and societal engagement. At the same time, the experience underscores the value of maintaining an appropriate balance between coordination and flexibility, allowing institutions to innovate while remaining responsive to broader objectives. From a theoretical perspective, this points to the existence of a dynamic equilibrium between autonomy and accountability, rather than a fixed or universal model. As higher education systems continue to evolve, identifying context-appropriate configurations will remain an important area of inquiry. The Chinese experience illustrates how governance arrangements can be adapted over time to support both institutional development and broader societal goals, offering relevant insights for comparative research and policy consideration.

5. Conclusion

China's ongoing efforts to develop a high-performing and well-coordinated university system provide a significant case for understanding contemporary higher education governance. This study has examined the interaction between autonomy and accountability in Chinese universities from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The findings suggest that China has developed a hybrid governance model in which universities are granted increasing levels of discretion in academic and managerial domains, while operating within a structured framework of coordination and evaluation. The Chinese experience demonstrates that autonomy and accountability are not necessarily opposing forces; rather, they can be configured in complementary ways to support institutional development. Over the past two decades, expanded decision-making capacity has enabled universities to pursue innovation in teaching, research, and international engagement, while governance mechanisms have contributed to maintaining alignment with broader developmental objectives. These dynamics have been associated with notable progress in research capacity, global visibility, and system expansion.

At the same time, the analysis highlights the importance of continuously refining governance arrangements to ensure a balanced integration of different institutional goals. In particular, the interaction between performance-based evaluation systems and broader educational objectives suggests the need for governance approaches that recognize both measurable outcomes and the

wider missions of higher education. This includes supporting diverse forms of academic development, fostering innovation, and enhancing the overall quality of education. Looking ahead, the sustainability of this governance model will depend on its capacity for ongoing adaptation. This may involve further improving evaluation frameworks, strengthening institutional governance mechanisms, and encouraging more diversified and context-sensitive approaches to university development. Such adjustments can help ensure that governance systems remain responsive to changing domestic conditions and an increasingly interconnected global higher education environment. From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the view that governance in higher education is not a zero-sum relationship between autonomy and accountability, but rather a dynamic process of achieving context-appropriate balance. The Chinese case illustrates how this balance can be structured in ways that reflect specific institutional, cultural, and policy contexts, offering valuable insights for comparative research and policy design.

In conclusion, China's experience underscores the importance of calibrating governance arrangements to support both institutional initiative and broader societal objectives. By integrating flexibility with coordination, and innovation with accountability, higher education systems can pursue sustainable development while responding effectively to evolving challenges. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how such alignment can be achieved in practice, and provide a useful reference for ongoing discussions on university governance in diverse global contexts.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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