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

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Abstract

China's higher education system faces a dynamic tension between institutional autonomy and state accountability. Historically, Chinese universities were tightly controlled by government agencies, but recent reforms have gradually increased their decision-making freedom in areas like curriculum, faculty appointments, and finances. This article adopts a conceptual and historical analysis, drawing on policy documents and recent scholarship to examine governance models. It applies governance theory and comparative perspectives to analyze how autonomy and accountability are balanced (or imbalanced) in Chinese universities. We find that while universities now enjoy greater autonomy in academic and administrative matters, the government continues to exercise effective control over key domains such as strategic direction and ideological education. Reforms have introduced elements of New Public Management and performance-based accountability – for example, competitive funding schemes and evaluations like the "Double First-Class" initiative that tie resources to outcomes. These mechanisms have propelled Chinese universities to improve research output and global rankings, but they also enforce government agendas and create new pressures on academic freedom. China's governance approach represents a hybrid model: it grants universities conditional autonomy to innovate and excel, yet reinforces accountability through political oversight and rigorous evaluations. Achieving a more optimal balance will require enhancing legal protections for academic freedom and developing accountability systems that prioritize educational quality and societal needs over narrow performance metrics.

Keywords: University Governance; Autonomy; Accountability; Higher Education Policy; Academic Freedom; Educational Reform

1. Introduction

China's higher education governance has evolved through profound shifts, especially in the past four decades of reform and opening. Traditional Chinese universities operated under a state-

controlled model with almost no institutional autonomy. Since the late 1970s, however, economic liberalization and global influences have prompted governance reforms to "streamline the relationship between government, society and higher education institutions". The government's stated aim was to move from direct micromanagement to macro-level regulation, granting universities greater freedom to manage academic affairs in response to societal needs. As a result, universities gradually gained autonomy in areas such as admissions, curriculum design, research agendas, and international cooperation. These changes align with global trends emphasizing university self-governance and academic innovation (Berdahl, 1990; Berdahl & Millett, 1991; Clark, 1983). On paper, Chinese universities today enjoy far more institutional autonomy than under the Soviet-influenced system of the 1950s–1970s.

However, increased autonomy has been coupled with new forms of accountability. The state did not "step back" so much as reframe its control. China remains a dominant actor in higher education, steering universities through funding levers, policy directives, and the presence of Communist Party organizations embedded in campus governance. Indeed, the governance 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 Chinese political traditions. Under this system, each public university's Party secretary (a state-appointed official) holds overarching authority alongside the university president, ensuring that institutional decisions align with Party-state objectives. This arrangement inherently limits full institutional independence. Scholars have noted that university autonomy in China remains restricted, as the state "retains effective control over key aspects of higher education governance" (Jiang & Li, 2016). In practice, critical decisions – from top leadership appointments to major financial allocations – are still subject to government approval. The concept of autonomy in the Chinese context therefore diverges from the Western ideal of complete institutional self-governance. Chinese universities are neither fully independent of the state nor mere executors of state will; rather, they operate in a partially integrated manner, enjoying flexibility in some domains while remaining tightly supervised in others.

From a theoretical standpoint, China's case highlights the classic governance dilemma of autonomy vs. accountability (Berdahl & Millett, 1991). Scholars have long argued that granting universities more autonomy can spur innovation and academic excellence, but governments often impose accountability measures to ensure alignment with national goals and public interests (Altbach et al., 2005). In China, this balance is influenced by cultural and political factors. Confucian tradition values hierarchical oversight and collective goals, which underpin acceptance of strong state involvement in universities. At the same time, market-oriented reforms and global competition have pushed Chinese policymakers to give universities more leeway to manage their affairs efficiently (e.g. in faculty hiring and industry collaboration) in order to build "world-class" institutions (Mok, 2016). The result is a hybrid governance model that can be seen as "supervisory governance" or a form of "quasi-decentralization". The state has partially "hollowed out" certain functions to universities and the market, a process Jessop termed the hollowing-out of the state in the context of global neoliberal trends(Jessop, 1993). Yet the Chinese state's retreat is selective and reversible; it maintains "essential power and authority" over higher education,

especially regarding ideology and strategic direction. In short, China is striving to create a modern university system that grants universities enough autonomy to be innovative and globally competitive, while holding them accountable – often via political mechanisms – to national development goals and socialist values (Li, 2020; Xu, 2021). This article explores how this delicate balance has been managed, the tensions it generates, and the implications for theory and practice of university governance. We proceed by outlining the methodology for our analysis, then examining major governance reforms and their outcomes (results), followed by a discussion of the broader theoretical and practical significance of China's experience.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theory-driven approach to analyze university governance in China. Rather than gathering new statistical data, we conduct a documentary analysis and literature review of policy texts, legal documents, and scholarly research. Key sources include Chinese government policy papers (e.g. the 2010–2020 Education Reform Plan), laws and regulations on higher education, and university charter documents, as well as academic studies on Chinese higher education governance from the past decade. We also draw on comparative perspectives from governance theories and international case studies. The analysis is structured in line with Ball's modified "policy cycle" framework, examining contexts of policy influence, text (content), and practice/effects. First, we consider the context of influence, identifying the political and socio-economic factors that have driven governance reforms (e.g. globalization, massification, political ideology). Next, we review the policy texts – key reform initiatives and regulations – to determine how they articulate autonomy and accountability. Finally, we assess practices and effects by synthesizing findings from case studies and expert assessments of how these policies have been implemented in universities (including any unintended consequences). The use of multiple sources and perspectives (policy documents, academic analyses, and historical accounts) allows for triangulation of insights, enhancing the credibility of our interpretations.

Notably, our methodology is primarily analytical and interpretive. We did not conduct interviews or surveys; instead, we rely on existing empirical studies (including surveys of faculty and university leaders) to inform our conclusions. For instance, we incorporate data from case studies of Chinese and Hong Kong universities on accountability practices, and statistics on university performance evaluations (such as the results of China's Double First-Class initiative). By combining policy analysis with findings from recent research, we aim to paint a comprehensive picture of the current state of university governance in China. Given that this is a theoretical perspective, we also engage with governance models (e.g. New Public Management, principal-agent theory, and Confucian managerialism) to interpret the Chinese experience. This methodological approach is appropriate because our goal is not hypothesis-testing but rather conceptual understanding – we seek to critically examine how autonomy and accountability are configured in Chinese universities and to contribute to theoretical discussions on university governance in politically centralized contexts. The analysis is limited by the availability of public information; some internal Party directives affecting universities are not fully transparent.

Nonetheless, the combination of open-source documents and scholarly research provides a robust basis for our theoretical exploration.

3. Results

3.1. Expanded Autonomy in University Operations

Our analysis finds that Chinese universities today have significantly more autonomy in their operations compared to the early Reform era (1980s). Reforms in the 1990s and 2000s decentralized many administrative controls. For example, universities can now set their own curricula and academic programs with minimal direct interference from the Ministry of Education (MOE). They have latitude to create new specialties, establish research centers, and collaborate with foreign institutions, as long as these align with broad national guidelines. Universities also gained greater say in student admissions and faculty hiring. The centralized assignment of graduates to jobs was abolished, allowing universities to develop programs based on market and societal needs (Chen et al., 2021). Financially, while core funding still comes from government, institutions can raise supplementary income through tuition, research grants, donations, and entrepreneurial activities, giving them semi-independent budgetary power (although tuition rates and major expenditures often still require government approval). Many universities have established Board of Trustees or advisory councils, including industry and alumni representatives, to advise on development – introducing a degree of shared governance unprecedented in the Mao era. These changes correspond to what Clark's theory would term a shift toward the "market" and "academic oligarchy" sides of the triangle of coordination, and a move away from exclusive state control (Clark, 1983). In short, substantive autonomy – the freedom to determine academic objectives and internal structures – has increased in Chinese higher education.

It is important to note that this autonomy is often conditional and must operate within boundaries set by the state. For instance, universities may choose whom to hire or promote, but the criteria (such as requiring political vetting and Party membership for leadership positions) reflect state priorities. Universities can admit students in innovative ways (like independent admissions exams), but enrollment quotas for each province are still dictated by the MOE. In governance terms, Chinese universities have been granted procedural autonomy in implementing policies (how to achieve goals) more than complete freedom to set their own goals. The government's official stance is encapsulated in the slogan of building a "modern university system" with Chinese characteristics: empowering universities to manage themselves "according to law" while insisting on Communist Party leadership in the governance structure. The UNESCO IIEP report (2014) captured this nuance: Chinese universities have gained independence in academic, financial, and personnel matters, yet the government retains control over ideological direction and top leadership appointments (IIEP, 2014). Our findings corroborate this. For example, since 2016, many university charters were revised to strengthen the role of Party committees, even as these charters also espouse greater academic autonomy for faculty in research and teaching (Fitzgerald, 2020). Thus, increased autonomy in daily operations coexists

with overarching Party-state authority. This duality is a defining result of China's recent governance reforms.

3.2. Strengthened Accountability Mechanisms

Parallel to expanding autonomy, Chinese authorities have implemented robust accountability mechanisms to monitor and steer universities. One major finding is the rise of performance-based evaluations for universities. In the mid-1990s, China introduced the University Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation to assess teaching quality across institutions. In the 2000s, a "Double Excellence" evaluation rated universities on various indices. Most prominently, the ongoing "Double First-Class" initiative (launched in 2017) exemplifies heightened accountability: universities designated as First-Class are expected to achieve world-class status in select disciplines, with progress periodically reviewed by panels of experts. In 2022, after the first phase, 15 universities received warnings that they might lose this elite status (and associated funding) if they failed the 2024 final assessment. This is a clear case of accountability in action – tying resources and reputation to measurable outcomes. Universities responded by instituting internal reforms: setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for departments and faculty, incentivizing research output and international visibility. Our review indicates that such evaluation regimes have indeed boosted research publications and global rankings of top Chinese universities (Liu et al., 2023). At the same time, they risk encouraging academic quantity over quality and can narrow universities' focus to indicators that are measured (e.g. SCI-indexed papers), a classic downside of audit culture noted in other contexts (Zhang & Li, 2025).

Another dimension of accountability is ideological and administrative oversight. Every university faculty member is subject to periodic evaluations that include not only teaching/research performance but also adherence to Party ideology and ethics. In 2016, the MOE issued guidelines requiring faculty to "firmly uphold the Party's line" and punishing the spread of any "harmful ideas" in classrooms. This reflects what John Fitzgerald (2020) calls the Party's "ideological accountability" regime in higher education – professors and administrators are held to account for contributing to the Party's mission, such as by incorporating socialist core values into curricula (Fitzgerald, 2020). Such measures go beyond what is seen in Western accountability systems (which tend to focus on academic outcomes and financial compliance); they are unique to China's political context. From a governance perspective, this indicates that accountability in China is not only managerial (about efficiency and quality) but also political. University leaders must regularly report to government/Party authorities on both kinds of targets. Indeed, the Party Secretary at each institution serves as an internal overseer, ensuring that the university's direction is aligned with national and Party directives (Jiang & Li, 2016). Our analysis underscores that this dual accountability – to market/academic standards on one hand and to Party-state mandates on the other – is a distinctive feature of Chinese university governance.

For example, Hong Kong's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and teaching quality reviews influenced practices in Mainland China. Several elite universities in China have implemented their own internal "mini-RAE" to allocate resources to departments based on research productivity, mimicking global best practices for accountability in research. The idea of competitive funding (where universities compete for special research grants or project 985/211

funding in the 2000s) introduced market-like accountability – universities must prove their merit to secure funding. Additionally, transparency measures have improved: universities now publicly release annual reports and undergo audits, addressing financial accountability to stakeholders. The state's role has thus transformed into what some scholars call a "regulatory state" or "evaluative state" in higher education (as seen in Europe and elsewhere) – it evaluates and regulates more, even if it manages less directly. Our findings show that Chinese universities have set up extensive data collection and institutional research offices to track performance indicators, reflecting an "accountability culture." For instance, at Nanjing University (a case study example), departments are ranked by publications and grants; those underperforming face administrative consequences. Such practices align with New Public Management principles that China has selectively adopted to improve efficiency and global competitiveness (Su, 2025). However, a side effect reported in studies is increased pressure and even reduced academic freedom, as faculty may avoid controversial research that could jeopardize evaluations (Fitzgerald, 2020; Yang, 2020). In summary, the results of governance reforms include a more autonomous yet more rigorously monitored university sector – a paradoxical outcome where universities are empowered to act, but within closely watched parameters.

3.3. Governance Outcomes and Ongoing Challenges

The combined effect of increased autonomy and strengthened accountability has been both positive and problematic. On the positive side, Chinese universities have rapidly improved in global standings. Many are now ranked in world top 100 lists – an outcome the government uses to justify its policies. Greater autonomy in academic matters has allowed institutions to innovate with new programs (for example, interdisciplinary research hubs, entrepreneurship centers, international joint colleges) which likely would not have emerged under the old command structure. Accountability mechanisms have helped instill a culture of striving for excellence; universities intensely focus on improving teaching quality and research output when they know they will be evaluated (and compared) by the MOE or international agencies. There is evidence that student outcomes (such as employment rates and satisfaction) have improved at many institutions in the past decade, partially due to such performance monitoring (Chen et al., 2021; Grebennikov & Shah, 2013). Furthermore, the diversification of funding has made universities more responsive and agile – they engage more with industry and society to attract funds, which in turn makes them more accountable to stakeholders beyond the government (Tight, 2019). These outcomes align with the government's objective of creating a more dynamic, globally competitive higher education system that still serves national priorities (Wang, 2016).

Another challenge is balancing quantitative and qualitative goals. The strong emphasis on measurable outputs (publications, patents, rankings) as accountability metrics may overshadow broader educational goals like critical thinking, civic education, and moral development. There are concerns that Chinese universities are becoming too focused on "countable" performance – sometimes dubbed an "evaluation obsession." Faculty lament the pressure to publish quickly and frequently, fearing that a dip in numbers could hurt their department in evaluations (Tight, 2019; Wang & Liu, 2011). This can discourage risk-taking in research or teaching innovation that doesn't immediately show up in metrics. Additionally, regional and lesser-known institutions feel

strained by one-size-fits-all accountability standards. Our review of policy documents suggests that while elite universities thrive under competitive accountability (given their resources), some local colleges struggle to meet the same indicators and face funding cuts or merger pressure as a result. This could widen inequalities in the higher education system, a trend noticed by Xu (2021) as China moves into a post-massification stage(Xu, 2021). Accountability is necessary, but if not differentiated, it might punish institutions serving disadvantaged communities. The government has started to address this by developing more nuanced evaluation frameworks (e.g., allowing teaching-focused universities to be evaluated on different criteria than research universities), but implementation is uneven.

Finally, a challenge lies in the area of global collaboration and norms. As Chinese universities engage internationally, differences in governance expectations can create friction. Global academic partners often expect institutions to uphold academic freedom and collegial governance (Fitzgerald, 2020). Cases of scholars being censored or foreign faculty contracts not renewed for political reasons have drawn international criticism. Such incidents suggest that if the Chinese governance model is perceived as overly centralized, it may constrain the global trust and soft power China aims to cultivate through educational exchange. The challenge for China is to demonstrate that its universities can be world-class not just in output, but also in upholding universal academic values – all while maintaining a Chinese governance style. Addressing this will require careful recalibration of how autonomy and accountability are defined in Chinese higher education moving forward. Our results section thus paints a picture of significant achievements in system expansion and excellence, tempered by structural tensions that remain unresolved. These findings set the stage for a deeper discussion on their implications for theory and practice.

4. Discussion

The Chinese experience with university governance offers rich insights for theoretical debates on autonomy and accountability in higher education. One key takeaway is the viability of a hybrid governance model that does not fit neatly into Western categorizations of either state control or complete institutional autonomy. In China, we see a "dual governance system": universities operate with managerial and academic autonomy in many daily functions, yet a parallel hierarchy embeds accountability and control. From a comparative perspective, this reflects what some scholars call an "East Asian model" of university governance, seen to varying degrees in places like Singapore and Vietnam, where the state remains deeply involved even as universities gain autonomy (Mok, 2016). What distinguishes China is the scale and explicitness of Party involvement, which is ideologically driven. Theoretically, this suggests that autonomy and accountability are not strictly opposing poles, but can be configured in layered ways. Chinese universities have operational autonomy but strategic accountability – they can decide how to teach and research, but the state sets the direction (e.g., emphasizing STEM fields, or Marxist theory courses) and monitors compliance. This challenges the classic notion that real autonomy only exists when external accountability is minimized. China's case indicates a spectrum or continuum rather than a binary.

From the lens of principal-agent theory, one could view the Chinese government as the principal using various mechanisms to ensure its agent (the university) fulfills desired objectives. Traditional principal-agent models stress that too much control (monitoring, punishing) can demotivate the agent and stifle initiative, whereas too little control risks goal divergence. China's evolving practices – such as performance contracts, targeted funding, and evaluation exercises – can be seen as attempts to fine-tune the incentive structure. The Double First-Class policy, for instance, is effectively a contract: universities receive extra funding in exchange for commitment to reach world-class status by certain metrics, with the threat of losing status if they underperform. This introduces a quasi-market accountability within a state framework, which principal-agent theorists might argue creates more alignment of goals without direct micromanagement. Our discussion posits that this approach has yielded results in efficiency and output, but at some cost to the agent's intrinsic motivation (some Chinese academics express that their work is increasingly driven by metrics rather than curiosity). The theory would predict such an outcome if extrinsic incentives become too dominant. Balancing intrinsic academic values with extrinsic accountability pressures remains a challenge, consistent with global experiences under New Public Management in higher education.

Another discussion point is how China's governance reforms align with the concept of "good governance" in higher education. Good governance is often defined (by the World Bank, UNESCO, etc.) by principles like transparency, participation, effectiveness, rule of law, and responsiveness. China has made strides in some of these areas – e.g., introducing more transparent evaluation criteria, and even experimenting with faculty participation in decision-making through academic committees. University governance bodies, such as academic boards, exist, but ultimate decisions frequently rest with Party or administrative leaders. This could be critiqued from a good governance perspective as lacking full stakeholder participation (for example, students and rank-and-file faculty have little say in strategic decisions). On rule of law, China did enact the Higher Education Law (1998) which codifies university rights and obligations, moving governance onto a legal basis rather than pure administrative fiat. That is a positive from a governance standpoint. However, the law also enshrines the leadership of the Party in universities, blending legal-rational authority with political authority. The duality of legal and political control in Chinese university governance might be conceptually unique. This invites a rethinking of how we evaluate governance quality: perhaps conventional Western criteria need adaptation to fully understand the Chinese model's strengths and weaknesses.

Our findings also resonate with Jun Li's notion of the "Zhong-Yong model" or Chinese University 3.0, which proposes that Chinese universities are developing an indigenous form of autonomy that emphasizes self-mastery in service to the state. In this cultural perspective, a university can be autonomous in managing itself (self-mastery) while still fundamentally oriented towards state-defined missions – a balance informed by the Confucian ideal of Zhong-Yong (the Golden Mean of moderation) (Li, 2020). Our discussion finds this framework quite apt: Chinese universities have not sought complete separation from the state (as some Western models imply), but rather negotiated a space where they pursue academic excellence in a way that also bolsters state goals (e.g., economic development, technological innovation, national pride). The

"pragmatic Confucian concept of zhong-yong" underpins an acceptance that some sacrifice of "autonomous freedom" is made in exchange for state support and social stability. This may ultimately allow Chinese universities to "unfold their potentialities" dramatically – as evidenced by their rapid advancements – but with the caveat that certain freedoms are curtailed. Whether this model is sustainable in the long run is debatable. As global norms in higher education increasingly value academic freedom and institutional independence (see, for example, the Bologna Process in Europe), Chinese universities might confront external and internal pressures to loosen political controls if they aim to be truly global institutions.

Finally, we must consider what lessons the Chinese case offers to other systems and to governance theory. One lesson is that accountability needs to be multi-dimensional. China's emphasis on hard metrics and ideological conformity showcases extremes that other systems might avoid, but it also shows the importance of aligning university activities with societal needs. Many Western systems struggle with universities that have autonomy but are accused of being unaccountable to the public (tuition increases, esoteric research, etc.). China's model demonstrates a powerful tool of ensuring universities contribute to national objectives – something developing countries might see as attractive. On the flip side, China's experience warns of the dangers of over-accountability: when everything is audited and politicized, creativity and critical inquiry can suffer. A theoretical implication is that there is an optimal zone of autonomy-accountability balance that maximizes innovation and public value. The Chinese case, still unfolding, provides data points to theorize this balance. As Su (2025) metaphorically put it, education needs both "roots" (grounding in local context and national purpose) and "wings" (the freedom to explore and innovate). Chinese university governance is essentially an attempt to grow both roots and wings – deepening accountability to the nation while expanding academic autonomy – though not without friction. Our discussion underscores that achieving this ideal requires continuous adjustment. Policies like differentiated evaluations (different metrics for different university types) and incremental increases in faculty governance could help. In essence, rethinking university governance in China involves reconciling two valid aspirations: universities as engines of independent knowledge creation, and universities as instruments for collective national progress. How China manages this reconciliation will remain a pivotal question for the coming years.

5. Conclusion

China's pursuit of a high-performing yet state-aligned university system is a compelling experiment in higher education governance. This article examined the theoretical and practical interplay of autonomy and accountability in Chinese universities. We found that China has built a hybrid governance model: universities are granted notable autonomy in academic and managerial domains, but this autonomy operates under a vigilant accountability framework dominated by the state and Communist Party. The Chinese case demonstrates that autonomy and accountability need not be mutually exclusive – they can be orchestrated in a calibrated way to drive rapid improvements in higher education. Indeed, the past two decades have seen Chinese universities thrive on conditional autonomy: when given leeway to make decisions, they have innovated and

excelled, yet the guiding hand of the state has kept them oriented toward national objectives. This has contributed to achievements such as China's rise in global university rankings, its expanding research output, and its increasing role as a destination for international students.

At the same time, the Chinese model raises cautionary flags about the costs of an overbearing accountability regime. The ever-present weight of political oversight and stringent evaluations may inhibit the very creativity and critical thinking that define world-class universities. The removal of phrases like "academic freedom" from university charters and the emphasis on ideological conformity are reminders that too heavy a hand can stifle the intellectual vibrancy of campuses. As China aims to build globally leading universities, it may need to allow a greater degree of intellectual freedom and protect scholarly autonomy, even as it maintains reasonable accountability for outcomes and public mission. Striking this balance is no easy task. It requires policymakers to trust academic institutions and tolerate a diversity of viewpoints, and it requires university leaders to act responsibly and transparently so that increased autonomy does not lead to complacency or detachment from society.

In conclusion, the trajectory of university governance in China exemplifies a "bargain" in which autonomy is expanded in exchange for meeting heightened accountability demands. Whether this bargain is sustainable will depend on adaptive governance: the ability to reform evaluation systems that have unintended negative effects, to empower internal governance bodies (like academic committees) for more bottom-up input, and to possibly relax certain political controls as universities mature. The theoretical implication is that governance is not a zero-sum between autonomy and accountability; it is about finding an equilibrium that fits the socio-political context. China's current equilibrium has driven success but is under strain, evidenced by internal calls for more freedom (Fitzgerald 2020). As we rethink university governance in China, a truly benign governance ecology would be one that gives universities the "wings" to explore knowledge freely while keeping them rooted in accountability to the public good, rather than to just bureaucratic targets or political doctrine. Achieving that will require careful, ongoing adjustments – a dance, perhaps, toward enlarging the cage or eventually removing some of its bars. The Chinese experience thus offers both inspiration and caution, providing valuable lessons for higher education communities worldwide about how powerful the synergy of autonomy and accountability can be, and how important it is to get that synergy right.

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