# Management and "Administerization" in China's Higher Education System: A View from the Trenches

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**Abstract**

Scholarship on university autonomy in China's higher education system in the past three decades has focused on the macro-relationship between the party-state and university leadership. This paper focuses instead on university-level management practices and college-level academic autonomy. Drawing on the discourse of "administerization" and "de-administerization" within Chinese academia, we demonstrate how the dual administration system and outdated management practices common in the higher education system limit academic quality and educational autonomy at the college level.

**Keywords:** Chinese higher education; university autonomy; college autonomy; policymaking; administration; management; administerization and de-administerization

The scholarly English-language literature on China's higher education system has had much to say about university autonomy and the quest for universities to manage their own academic affairs. Understandably, this scholarship has focused on the macro-relationship between the party-state and university leadership, and scholars have noted a trend in recent decades towards greater institutional autonomy in China's higher education system.[1] Relatively little has been said about the relationship between institutional autonomy and management practices *within* Chinese universities, nor about the autonomy or authority of mid-level academic administrators vis-à-vis university-level administrative units controlled by the Party, senior university administrators or university bureaucracies such as the finance office (*caiwuchu* 财务处), human resources office (*renshichu* 人事处), organization office (*zuzhibu* 组织部) or teaching affairs office (*jiaowuchu* 教务处). Yet, herein lies another source of hierarchy in the Chinese academy that distorts academic goals and undermines academic quality in comparison to academic management structures and practices common to most Western institutions. It must also be noted that the positive trend towards greater university autonomy

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1 See, for instance, Hayhoe et al. 2011, 16–17, 21–29; Mok 2010; Pan 2009, 7–34; Li, Mei, and Yang 2015; Mok and Han 2016.

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previously noted by scholars has been thoroughly reversed in the last four or five years by the reassertion of party-state authority and the renewed focus on ideological obeisance.[2]

I served as a mid-level academic administrator and faculty member (teaching courses in modern Chinese history) in a public Chinese university for nine years, from June 2010 through July 2019. Although many international faculty members have lengthy teaching experience in China, my experience as a long-serving mid-level administrator working inside the public university administrative structure is very unusual. To the best of my knowledge, I was the longest serving non-Chinese academic administrator at any post-1949 public Chinese university. Consequently, I can offer a unique perspective on academic autonomy and related managerial practices in China's higher education institutions.

This essay addresses the questions of what the common internal management practices and structures are within the university and what is their significance for academic autonomy and related issues. In this essay, I seek to answer the following questions. What are the key managerial or administrative challenges confronting mid-level *academic* administrators in public Chinese universities? And, what are the primary sources or causes of these challenges? My summary answer to the first question is that mid-level administrators – whether Party members or not – carry a heavy burden of responsibility, with very little corresponding authority and very few channels for input into the policymaking and decision-making processes that impact their responsibilities. My short answer to the second question is that the challenges confronted by mid-level administrators in Chinese academia arise from conflicts inherent to the dual administrative structure that is designed to ensure ultimate control of the higher education (HE) system by the party-state, and from the antiquated top-down "command and control" management style typical of both the Party and traditional Chinese bureaucracies.

In answering these questions more fully below, I first describe my early expectations and impressions as a new academic administrator in China, and my growing comprehension of administrative practices and structures that hobbled the educational goals of many mid-level administrators. I then introduce the critical discourse within China's academic community on "administerization" and "de-administerization."[3] This discourse identifies and critiques managerial practices common at many Chinese universities that constrain educational quality and autonomy for faculty members and mid-level administrators such as deans,

2 Readers will note that the meaning, and relevance, of academic "autonomy" in the Chinese context is contested among the various authors of this special issue. My use of the term follows the meaning commonly understood in Western academia, as described by John Burns in his essay elsewhere in this volume. Jun Li, drawing on the discussion in Hayhoe et al. 2011, 17, argues in his essay that the concept of "self-mastery" rather than autonomy may be better suited to the Chinese context. My reading of the Chinese literature on "administerization" and "de-administerization" indicates that many Chinese scholars understand, seek and argue for academic autonomy as the term is commonly used in Western academia.

3 These terms are defined and discussed below.

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department chairs, work unit and programme directors. I draw on examples from my own experiences within the academy to illustrate some of the maladaptive or obsolete managerial practices identified in the literature on administerization and de-administerization.

My university is rather unique among public Chinese universities in that it is jointly supported by the Ministry of Education (MOE), the provincial government and a private benefactor. In other words, it is a public university with additional, private funding support. Given our external financial support, my university has been more progressive, more autonomous and perhaps more "professional" than is the norm at most Chinese universities. Until very recently, the university focused on undergraduate education and intentionally maintained an enrolment of less than 10,000 students. Thus, it is a small university by Chinese standards. Until four or five years ago, it enjoyed a significant degree of academic freedom owing to agreements between the national and provincial governments and the private benefactor. Academically, it has a well-deserved reputation as a progressive institution.[4] For example, it implemented a more open curriculum with a high degree of academic freedom, elective courses and a credit-hour system in the first decade of the 21st century. The university also has a strong focus on internationalization. Initially, the key elements of internationalization included the hiring of international (i.e. foreign) or internationally trained faculty members and a curricular requirement that all students acquire intermediate-level English skills. Approximately 20 per cent of the faculty members hold international passports and the English-language programme is one of the best in the country. Over time, internationalization took on a larger curricular dimension with the establishment of a significant number of English-language content courses taught by well-trained international faculty members.

Despite these relatively unique characteristics, my institution is also quite representative of Chinese universities. For example, its administrative offices, management practices and personnel structure are common to most mainland universities, and we are afflicted with the same managerial maladies identified in the discourse on administerization. Our operating budget is determined by the provincial department of education (DOE), as are faculty promotions, and of course we must seek approval from the national Ministry of Education for development of any new majors or degree programmes. Recently, in keeping with new national soft-power goals, the rhetorical focus of internationalization has shifted at our university: we have developed a new international college with plans to enrol international students in university degree programmes while simultaneously reducing student exchange programmes and curtailing study abroad opportunities for our students.

4 The progressive nature of the university has drawn political scrutiny and subsequent ideological retrenchment in the past four or five years as the Party has reasserted its authority over China's higher education system.

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I was hired in 2010 to bring organizational, curricular and pedagogical change to a liberal arts college, which had been established in 1993. The Chinese name for the college, *wenxueyuan* 文学院, might more accurately be translated as the college of humanities but university leaders at the time preferred the broader, more inclusive and more aspirational implications embodied in the notion of a liberal arts education. Owing in large part to its external funding, the college has been quite successful in developing a strong set of courses in Chinese and English literature, linguistics, translation studies, cultural anthropology and cross-cultural communication, world history, comparative religion, global studies, logic and ethics. Specific curricular initiatives led by the college include development of the campus-wide general education programme and required coursework meant to foster critical, creative and systems-level thinking skills. Nevertheless, as You Guo Jiang notes in his recent monograph on the higher education system in China, liberal arts education since the 1990s "has remained a marginalized program in an era dominated by scientific and technological utilitarianism."[5] Although quite special in its international focus, progressive curricular development and external funding, the status of the liberal arts at our institution certainly fits Jiang's characterization. The largest college is engineering, followed by the medical college and the business school. The liberal arts programmes and courses are housed in the smallest of nine colleges, approximately one-third the size of the engineering college. While the college offerings in the humanities are quite strong, offerings in the social sciences are notably underdeveloped. Most social science courses are taught by another educational unit – the *shekebu* 社科部 or School of Social Science, recently renamed the *makesizhuyi xueyuan* 马克思主义学院 or School of Marxism – and subsumed into the mandatory curriculum of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Xi Jinping Thought.[6]

As a new administrator in China, with an explicit mandate for change, I anticipated numerous challenges in leading the college. Perhaps the faculty members would find it difficult for work with an outsider or be resistant to active learning pedagogies? Perhaps my Chinese-language skills would be inadequate to the task?[7] Perhaps my academic training and administrative experience in the US would be inadequate for the bicultural and bilingual environment I was expected to foster at the university? To my surprise, though, none of these potential challenges became serious problems. Instead, within just a few months, it became apparent that the primary challenge was to understand and work effectively

5 Jiang 2014, 25. For the low status of the liberal arts and "humanistic knowledge" at Chinese universities, see also Li, Qiang, and Wei 2016, 42–43.

6 One consequence of this dearth of social sciences is that our students graduate from college with a very limited conceptual or linguistic framework for understanding social and psychological problems.

7 My Chinese language skills were inadequate to the task but over the years I hired two excellent translators/assistants. They worked diligently to correct my linguistic and cultural misunderstandings and kept me from making too many egregious administrative mistakes or social gaffes.

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within the opaque administrative and bureaucratic hierarchy of China's university system.

During my first few years as a dean in China, I noticed that administrative offices (with duties comparable to human resources, business affairs or student affairs at universities outside the mainland) hold more academic authority than do college deans. In fact, the larger administrative units often behave as little fiefdoms, perhaps responsive to Party directives but otherwise frequently non-responsive to the actual needs of faculty, departments, colleges or the educational mission of the institution. Staff members in these work units typically have minimal if any relevant previous experience or training, nor have they worked at other institutions and seen other ways of doing things. In addition, obsolete "command and control" management practices result in low faculty and staff morale and low institutional engagement as well as poor policymaking, decision making, and implementation in areas such as programme and curricular development, faculty hiring and training, and performance assessment.[8] The policies and processes for major annual tasks such as setting budgets or personnel evaluation change frequently and with no forewarning. Meetings are rarely called to solve problems. Instead, most meetings are "informational," called at very short notice and often with no agenda, no clear goal, no clear outcome and no follow up. Bottlenecks in both policymaking and decision making often bring important initiatives to a standstill. Turnover among administrators also brings important initiatives to a halt, since new administrative leaders feel a need to launch new projects. Consequently, funded projects deemed to be of strategic importance last year are simply abandoned this year, seemingly with no concern for previous investments or sustainable development. Finally, the use of power in ways that benefit or appear to benefit senior administrators, their home department, college or close associates, rather than for the benefit of the educational mission, are not uncommon.[9]

## Administerization and De-administerization

At first, I attributed these problems to my own misunderstanding of the system or to the idiosyncratic behaviour of individual university leaders. Over time, discussions with colleagues who reported similar phenomena at other universities in China led me to consider broader causes, particularly the top-down orientation of traditional Chinese management. Eventually, I began looking at the critical body of literature on university "administerization" (*xingzhenghua* 行政化) and "de-administerization" (*quxingzhenghua* 去行政化), and the systemic nature of academic maladministration became more apparent. Administerization and

8 For an informative and insightful discussion of "command" management practices in the Chinese higher education system, see Fung 2018.

9 This use and abuse of power is discussed more fully below. Obviously, many of the problems I describe in this paragraph are also seen frequently in North American or European universities, but not to the same extent and the causes may more often be idiosyncratic rather than systemic.

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de-administerization are awkward, fabricated terms in English, and the Chinese words can have alternative translations. *Xingzhenghua* or administerization can also be translated as bureaucratization or bureaucratism. Similarly, *quxingzhenghua* or de-administerization can be translated as de-bureaucratization and is occasionally translated simply as de-administration. The terms are not unique to academia but instead entered common usage during Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 reforms as part of the nationwide call to reduce party-state control over industry, healthcare, education and other facets of economic and social life. For readers with a historical sensibility, the discourse on "de-administerization" harkens back to the Maoist "red versus expert" discourse of the late 1950s and 1960s. De-administerization, therefore, is a call to reduce the scope of "red" Party authority and empower "experts," thereby increasing economic efficiencies, streamlining decision making, and enhancing managerial processes by reducing the number of offices, personnel and paperwork involved in day-to-day management. De-administerization signals a desire to focus managerial energy on matters of academic significance, professionalism, productivity and efficiency rather than political control or personal aggrandizement.

The term administerization signifies the concept of dual administration, with party-state officials paralleling (or shadowing) academic management personnel and exercising ultimate authority over academic affairs.[10] Administerization also reflects what James McDougall calls "interpenetrated management" or "penetrated administration," wherein university-level work units such as the teaching affairs office (TAO) have branch offices within the colleges.[11] These branch offices, typically staffed by very junior people, are often informed about new or changing university policies well before such information reaches deans, department chairs or faculty members. Thus, academic administrators and faculty members frequently find themselves dependent upon non-academic staff members for basic information about important academic policy developments, rules or new administrative practices. To put this another way, communication channels often function vertically within specific work units and may only infrequently connect horizontally with other institutional units. More importantly, new policies and rules are typically set by specific bureaucratic or administrative work units with no input from affected constituencies.

10 The phrase "dual administration" refers to the practice, common throughout all state (or "public") enterprises such as schools, universities, government offices and state-owned enterprises, as well as most of the larger "private" enterprises such as the telecommunications industry, for the administrative structure to comprise not only administrators with relevant managerial knowledge or technical expertise but also a parallel body of managers assigned by the Party. Although the day-to-day duties of these Party administrators may vary widely, their overarching task is to ensure the downward flow of central Party directives and ideological pronouncements and proper obeisance to those directives and pronouncements. This dual administrative structure ensures Party control over most facets of daily life within the Chinese work force.

11 For a discussion of "interpenetrated management" or "penetrated administration," see James McDougall's article in this special issue of *The China Quarterly*.

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Although there is disagreement on details, the discourse on administerization and de-administerization often describes a tripartite division of administrative power and authority within China's higher education system. The party-state, usually coded as "the government," stands at the top of this division, which is further subdivided into national, provincial and institutional levels. When I first came to China, this institutional level of power was only occasionally felt or seen at my university, and we almost never saw representatives from the national or provincial levels. The next level of power, very much in evidence on campus, lies in the hands of senior university administrators, typically the Party secretary, president and vice-presidents. According to the discourse on de-administerization, senior university leaders often are captured by the exercise of power and lose sight of the university's educational mission. At the bottom level of administrative power and authority are mid-level administrators and faculty members. Not surprisingly, critics of the hierarchy believe the power structure should be revised or inverted.[12]

Of course, it is not possible for Chinese academics to openly call for an end to party-state control in the higher education system. Instead, critics of the system focus on the ineffective nature of the dual administrative structure, noting that the goal of their critique is only to improve administration as a tool and curtail its power as an end. At the same time, critics leave little room for doubt that the dual administrative structure *is* the source of administerization. For example, Feng Lei and his colleagues Liu Huang and Huang Wei studied the administrative structure of China's "985" project universities (top-ranked universities that received significant financial support from the central government) and concluded that "most of China's first-class universities have 13–15 leaders from the Party or government, 30 Party or government agencies represented, and 400–500 staff members from state agencies, among whom are more than 100 cadres at the section level."[13] Feng and his colleagues cite Liao Xiaoping 廖小平, a professor at South Central University of Forestry and Technology, to the effect that the "current absence of normative and well-designed management is the direct consequence of administerization" responsible for distorting "administrative management from a tool to an end, distorting its value from serving teachers, students, teaching and scientific research to benefitting itself."[14] Wang Baoxi

12 For descriptions and discussion of the hierarchical power structure of university administration, see Gao 2015, 69–70; Wang and Tao 2016, 43–45; Feng, Liu and Huang 2014, 23–24; and Fung 2018.

13 Feng, Liu and Huang 2014, 23. Feng does not provide staffing data for the complete administrative structure at these universities, so we do not know the overall percentages of Party versus academic personnel. Feng and his colleagues also do not mention specific costs for this parallel administrative structure; however, a former colleague and I estimated that the dual structure at our university consumed at least 30% of the institution's budget and staffing. A person with a more intimate knowledge of my university's budget set the cost at 40%. However, throughout the institution, Party staffers do some of the work that would be done by student affairs personnel at universities in the West, including student recruiting, counselling (of a sort) and job placement. I have not found explicit discussion of the costs associated with dual administration in the literature on de-administerization but a critique is implicit in the frequent references to lack of academic resources, especially at non-elite institutions of higher education.

14 Feng, Liu and Huang 2014, 23.

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notes that most of the respondents to his survey of faculty and administrators at ten public institutions indicated that administrative "meddling" was "rather serious" and that faculty members and students benefited the least from the current administrative structure.[15] Wang Min and his co-authors see the same problems at vocational institutions, arguing that the "[vocational] college becomes an extension department of the executive branch … the government takes control of … personnel appointment … fiscal power, and supervision. Hence there is no independence" for vocational colleges. Executive management merely "becomes an obstruction" leading to "high cost and low efficiency" and "unfair allocation of resources."[16] Yang Hongxing argues that senior administrators have themselves become "bureaucratized" and have lost sight of the academic mission.[17] In other words, the sentiment expressed in the literature on de-administerization is that university administration serves either government (i.e. political) interests or the personal interests of the senior administrators themselves and not the faculty members, students or the educational mission.

## Autonomy, Responsibility, Authority

In the first decade of the 21st century, many scholars examining Chinese higher education practices were modestly optimistic about the positive trend towards greater institutional autonomy. However, as Rui Yang and his colleagues point out in their study of accountability and autonomy at Chinese universities, an increase in institutional autonomy is frequently offset by governmental requirements for greater accountability.[18] Yang and his collaborators also identify two "levels" of autonomy – institutional and individual – and note that institutional autonomy "could be exercised to reduce the autonomy of individual academics."[19] The body of literature on administerization and de-administerization further complicates the binary of institution and individual identified by Rui Yang. In fact, the literature on de-administerization is blistering in its critique of *university* management and makes clear that the trend towards institutional autonomy does not trickle down to the college or department levels. In their essay on internal management structures at ten public universities, Wang Baoxi and Tao Kouhong argue that the management authority in leading universities is centralized at the highest level, whereas the "rights of management" at the college and department levels "do not have a clear distinction, which results in low enthusiasm and efficiency at the root level."[20] Yang Hongxing suggests that "autonomy" in the Chinese higher education system only benefits those at the

15 Wang, Baoxi, and Tao 2016, 43.
16 Wang, Min, et al. 2015, 2–3. The literature on administerization and de-administerization is often circumspect in its wording. The government and the Party are not synonymous but it is common, and safer, for academics to refer to the government rather than the Party.
17 Yang, Hongxing 2016.
18 Yang, Rui, Vidovich and Currie 2006, 588. This has certainly been the case at my institution.
19 Ibid., 582.
20 Wang, Baoxi, and Tao 2016, 44–45.

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top: "What we call 'de-administerization' requires [senior] administrative staff to make clear that their work is to serve the growth of students and teachers, rather than ruling from a dominant position."[21] After citing former Peking University president Lin Jianhua 林建华 on the need for a renewed sense of service among university leaders, Yang Hongxing declares that such leaders must also focus on effective management techniques, organizational structure, clearly defined job responsibilities and task objectives. Gao Jian, in his interesting survey of the literature on administerization and de-administerization, suggests that universities are not moving towards autonomy but instead have become the "vassals" (*fuyong* 附庸) of government, in part because traditional Chinese culture inclines university leaders to "worship government officials."[22] As we can see, the view from the trenches of academe is not sanguine about educational autonomy and quality. Instead, the argument is that a shift from "ruling" by the party-state and senior university administrators to more thorough-going university and college-level autonomy and greater reliance on effective modern management practices is much needed.

Chinese academe is not heading in the direction advocated in the literature on de-administerization. In recent years, China's universities have worked to ramp up their research productivity in response to the new national university ranking system and as a way of raising their profiles on international rankings. In a rather extreme case of "ruling from a dominant position" at my institution, senior administrators, working through the human resources office, have responded to these national changes by requiring deans to sign documents obligating their colleges to reach specific targets for the number of nationally or provincially funded projects applied to and awarded and the number of scholarly publications listed in the relevant disciplinary indexes. At the same time, though, senior administrators and the human resources office have tightly controlled the hiring of new, better-trained research faculty members. Initially, deans are free to set the target numbers for publications and funded projects, but if the senior leadership does not think the numbers are high enough, the deans must raise their targets. Deans may be able to encourage or pressure faculty members to apply for the target number of provincial and national research projects but, of course, provincial and national funding decisions are completely out of a dean's control. What faculty and college administrators see here is a way that senior administrators evade responsibilities themselves through a screen of scapegoats – in this case, the deans.[23] This is a rather typical example of abuse of power by senior leaders

21 Yang, Hongxing 2016.

22 Gao 2015, 69. The use of the word *vassal* is interesting since it implies a feudal relationship with a nation-state that identifies itself, within the Marxist typology, as explicitly anti-feudal and therefore modern.

23 For several years, deans and college-level Party secretaries at my institution have been held responsible for student recruitment targets for specific regions in the province and for employment rates of graduating students. Obviously, employment opportunities for new graduates are determined by the economy and the job market and are therefore beyond the control of college administrators. Thus, these requirements serve only to "motivate" college administrators while protecting university-level administrators.

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and it is also a very clear example of mid-level administrative responsibility with very limited authority.[24]

Aside from blatant abuse of power by senior administrators, the authority of mid-level administrators is also constrained in more mundane ways. At most of the Chinese universities with which I am familiar, and as the literature on de-administerization indicates, the hierarchical command and control pattern of management means that a small team of senior administrators makes almost all major decisions at Chinese universities. This group may consist of the president, Party secretary, three to five vice-presidents and a few directors from key bureaucracies as well as their counterparts in the Party with similar portfolios. Often, vice-presidents and the directors or vice-directors of key university-level bureaucracies are also Party leaders. At my university, this central leadership group usually tries to reach consensus on any given matter. On rare occasions, the leadership group may bring relevant mid-level administrators into a meeting for consultation on specific issues. However, once a decision is made, the ultimate authority – perhaps the Party secretary, perhaps the president or a vice-president tasked with a specific responsibility – must sign off on the relevant document(s) before any decision can be implemented. Not surprisingly, senior administrators travel frequently and may often be gone from campus for days or weeks at a time. At such times, it is common for important decisions to be delayed and important documents to go unsigned, even when the specific issue is a matter of routine. More serious delays occur if the senior leadership team fails to reach a consensus decision. At such times, it is not uncommon for a decision to be put off for weeks or months and for old college business as well as new initiatives to be brought to a standstill. In addition, if national policy is in flux, as is the case at the time of this writing, decisions on anything that might possibly be controversial are put off indefinitely, no matter at what cost to the institution.

Unfortunately, the presence or absence of a key leader and lack of consensus among leaders are not the only reasons for decision-making inefficiency. Bottlenecks also frequently occur when an issue requires cooperation or agreement between key bureaucracies such as the teaching affairs office and the human resources office or the finance office. To illustrate the seriousness of this problem, a bottleneck within the bureaucracy at my university resulted in many of our Chinese faculty members and some staff employees working for up to two years without a contract. There were several reasons for this problem. To outsiders, the human resources office could appear to be chronically understaffed, which may explain why the flow of paperwork is often quite slow. In fact, the problem is not in staffing but in process. For instance, each step in the contract drafting and approval process is handled by one or two specific staff members, and that work must then be reviewed and approved (stamped) by a more senior staff member. If the person with the stamp is

24 Of course, mid-level administrators have authority over their faculty members or staff – and this authority can also be abused.

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unavailable or busy with other tasks, there is a delay. Eventually, the work must be reviewed by the director. Then, the work must be reviewed by the responsible vice-president. If the director is out, there is another delay. If the vice-president overseeing human resources is out, there is a further delay. If at any point approval is not granted, the process will need to begin anew. In addition to this internal bureaucratic inefficiency, other units, including the finance office and the teaching affairs office as well as individual colleges, must concur on contractual wording or fiscal obligations; the senior administrators overseeing these offices must also concur. Moreover, any work-rule conflicts or changes at the national or provincial levels – a frequent occurrence – slow the process even further.[25] The teaching affairs office and the ideological apparatus have supra-institutional controls and constrain the autonomy of human resources offices as well as colleges by establishing national or provincial rules governing the hiring, promotion, demotion and firing of faculty and staff.[26] In addition, labour laws, tax laws and Ministry of Education rules also constrain human resources and finance offices as well as colleges. This glimpse into the heart of administerization demonstrates how supra-institutional bureaucracies such as the teaching affairs office as well as national and provincial ideological directives flow through (or throughout) the institution, further muddling any possibility of autonomous decision making or action.

There can also be a similar problem when renewing contracts for international members of faculty. For example, at my institution it is quite common for international faculty members to have a contract renewed just before the old contract expires. Again, the delay in issuing new contracts generally involves conflicts between national or local work unit rules, bureaucratic infighting over contractual wording, the unpredictability of annual budgets or, more recently, uncertainty about national policy directions. To address the bureaucratic complexities of contract renewal for international academic staff, I would usually initiate the renewal process in early October. If things went smoothly, faculty members might receive their new contract in May. Frequently, though, a new contract would be issued in June, a few weeks or even just a few days before the summer break, for the next school year, which would start in mid-August. Predictably, the uncertainty surrounding contract renewals forced international faculty members to apply for positions at other institutions. Over the years, the university has lost several good teachers owing to the bureaucratic vagaries of contract renewal.

25 For a brief discussion of how complex relations among departments at the national level such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Human Resources or the Organization Department of the Party may have overlapping and conflicting requirements that can foster "awkwardness" and "inconvenience" for universities, see Feng, Liu and Huang 2014, 25.

26 I thank James McDougall for reminding me of the supra-institutional nature of the teaching affairs office.

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## Corruption

Aside from the problem of bottlenecks in university decision making and implementation processes, the autonomy of colleges and departments is often impacted by the unpredictability or self-serving decisions of both governmental and university-level leadership. The issue of corruption is discussed extensively in the literature on administerization and de-administerization. For example, Gao Jian comments that "many universities have to plead, bribe, and develop relations with government officials" in return for government allocations of resources.[27] In their study of de-administration at vocational colleges, Wang Min and his collaborators note that "administrative power" allows "some officials [to] have advantages of gathering resources around themselves, which easily leads to corruption in the academic system."[28] Feng Lei and his associates indicate in their analysis of de-administerization that the problem of corruption applies much more broadly: "Many teachers in higher education institutions hope to become administrative officials before achieving academic success, because the system is like a pyramid, the top gathers power and resources."[29] In some cases, an established university policy or practice changes suddenly and in ways that benefit a leader or work unit at the expense of other units. The following vignette demonstrates how such policy changes can give rise to a sense of corruption and erode any sense of team work or shared goals within a university.

Most Chinese university budgets operate on the calendar year and not the academic year. Although there is variation among Chinese institutions, at my university budget requests for the coming calendar year are submitted early in the autumn semester and, in theory, the new budget will be announced and available at the beginning of the Spring semester, usually beginning in late February or early March. As is the case for many state universities in the US, the reality is that the actual budget announcement and allocation often come out several months late. At the end of my first year as a college dean in China in June 2011, our chief academic officer called a meeting of the deans and directors to inform us that the process for the 2011 budget was being changed. In previous years, the university had provided all colleges with an operating budget (using monies from the provincial department of education). The university's private benefactor covered budgets for some colleges, including liberal arts, law and art and design, as well as special projects, centre budgets and so forth. The provincial government funded other colleges such as engineering and science. Beginning with the new 2011 budget, the private funding contribution was given to the university's central administration, which then allocated it to all colleges as it saw fit. With no forewarning, no explanation and several months into the budget year, my college budget was suddenly cut by slightly more than 50 per

27 Gao 2015, 69–70.
28 Wang, Min, et al. 2015, 3.
29 Feng, Liu and Huang 2014, 24.

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cent. The budgets for several other colleges and schools were cut too, while the budget for the engineering college was increased substantially.

Coincidentally, perhaps, the chief academic officer's home college was engineering. This budget reallocation felt like a "bait and switch" practice to me since I had been hired with a budget geared to support the structural and curricular changes underway in my college. Implementation of those changes slowed considerably after the budget cut. I was not alone in my frustration at this sudden reversal to the college's budget: two other newly hired mid-level administrators with a similar mandate to implement change also had their budgets cut substantially. The results, predictably, were a loss of trust in university leadership and a decline in morale within the affected colleges. This case can easily be understood as an example of the sort of corruption described by Wang Min and his colleagues; however, the budget cut to the liberal arts and expansion of funds to engineering can also be understood as a strategic reallocation in line with national and provincial higher education priorities. Of course, the reallocation also buttressed support for senior university leaders, who could now apportion private funding from our benefactor as they wished.

## Policymaking

Another common thread in the literature on administerization and de-administerization is a sustained critique of policymaking and policy implementation practices in public universities. In their essay on national-level policy support for de-administerization and the enhancement of university autonomy, Cheng Tian and Lü Menghan characterize governmental policies on de-administerization as poorly designed and poorly implemented failures.[30] They argue that the current governmental policy is based on two vague and contradictory policy statements in "Opinions on upholding and improving the implementation of principal accountability under the leadership of the CCP committee in colleges" (*Guanyu jianchi he wanshan putong gaodeng xuexiao dangwei lingdaoxia de xiaozhangfuzezhi de shishi yijian* 关于坚持和完善普通高等学校党委领导下的校长负责制的实施意见), published by the General Office of the CCP Central Committee in 2014: "the Party Committee is in charge of the school work" and "the principal [i.e. university leader] is in charge of the administrative affairs."[31] They note, too, that "there is no doubt that this 'university leadership structure with Chinese characteristics' is far from a settled problem … if one side is weak and the other is strong, the strong will take the place of the weak. There

30 Cheng and Lü 2017, 69. In this interesting and ironic study of government documents on university management, autonomy and accountability, the authors examine three key policies meant to guide reform of the relationship between universities and the government: the 1985 "CCP Central Committee decisions on the reform of the education system," the 2010 "National medium- and long-term outline of education reform and development (2010–2020)" and the 2015 Ministry of Education's "Several opinions on separating governance and from operations and transforming government functions" (Education Law [2015], No. 5).

31 Cheng and Lü 2017, 70–71.

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being no concerted effort, the one side will exist in name only."[32] Cheng and Lü leave no doubt as to which is likely to be the strong side.

This approach to policymaking at the highest national levels is an intentional form of strategic ambiguity and it certainly serves as a model for policymaking at many universities. Any uncertainty or ambiguity in a policy is analogous to a flashing roadside sign: proceed with caution. In addition to intentionally vague policies, Cheng and Lü also identify the absence of any broader social participation in the policymaking process as another important hindrance to effective policymaking in Chinese universities.[33] In a similar vein, Wang and Tao point out that there is rarely any process for internal or external stakeholders to participate in university policymaking or management discussions and that internal management organizations (presumably offices such as human resources, finance or teaching affairs) are "more administration-like, and their supervision inclines to be useless."[34]

Policymaking in Western public universities is typically a cautious, reasonably transparent and often very time-consuming affair involving multiple constituencies, lengthy meetings and numerous drafts. The process can be especially fraught and heated in the making of annual performance evaluation or tenure and promotion policies. In the end, no one is happy but most issues have been aired and considered and a thoughtful compromise policy is finally accepted. Such a time-consuming and painful process is carefully avoided at Chinese universities for several reasons. Policymaking is expected to be a quick, top-down activity and is associated with specific offices, especially human resources, finance, teaching affairs, the organization department or the faculty union.[35] Each of these offices has a director who in turn reports to a specific vice-president. Therefore, personnel policy is typically the domain of the human resources office, whereas regulations about teaching workloads, preferred pedagogies or exam schedules fall under the sway of the teaching affairs office, perhaps with some input from the faculty union. Policymaking processes are rarely open because open meetings might result in personal conflict and subsequent public loss of face if sharp disagreements occur. In my experience, open meetings are essentially theatrical and not meant for substantive work, discussion or debate. For similar reasons, the policymaking process is rarely inclusive and there is little or no engagement with affected communities or constituencies until after the policy is drafted. In some cases, a bureaucracy such as the teaching affairs office will draft a policy

32 Ibid., 71.
33 Ibid., 72.
34 Wang, Baoxi, and Tao 2016, 44–45.
35 The faculty union in China is a Party organ and its activities are not comparable to the unions of Western academe. At my institution, the faculty union plays a minor role, at best, in the formulation of teaching regulations. However, from discussions with colleagues at other universities, I gather that faculty unions may be more engaged at some universities. The organization department is also a Party organ but, at least on my campus, its activities and responsibilities are opaque – secretive might be a more accurate term – especially to foreigners but even to non-Party Chinese faculty and staff. Consequently, I cannot speak with any authority about its role in personnel evaluations.

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and then send it out to faculty and mid-level administrators via email for comment. Those comments may then be addressed on a random or ad hoc basis in a final version. I never saw any systematic review and revision process for an academic policy and, in nine years, I only participated in one substantive discussion of a draft policy regarding a top-down initiative to develop Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other types of online courses.[36] In fact, relevant constituencies are often not consulted until after a policy has been implemented and then only if *major* flaws become evident. Since affected constituencies are so rarely consulted, it is common for only a few variables to be carefully considered in the policymaking process. Consequently, the implementation of such policies often is quite unsatisfactory. That is, the policies are made to suit the perceived needs of specific university-level (or government-level) bureaucracies and are ill suited to the conditions or educational responsibilities of the faculty members, staff or college administrators.

At my university, for example, our annual performance evaluation policy changed nine times in nine years. In most years, the changes were minor but there were also several major changes. Despite all these changes, it is fair to say that the policy has not improved. Evaluation criteria for faculty are vague and often announced at the end of an evaluation year rather than at the beginning. Further, there is no meaningful university-level feedback loop (although deans and department chairs are free to design their own internal feedback system). For several years, at the end of the evaluation process the bottom 10 per cent of faculty members and staff had to be singled out and their names were announced on the university website. Often, the people so listed were young or new employees and had not yet had time to master their job skills nor to become well known to their supervisors or older colleagues in the college. This form of public humiliation was meant to motivate these people to work harder but, of course, it generally had a debilitating effect. Deans and other work unit directors were vociferous in their objection to this policy, especially the public listing of people at the bottom 10 per cent in the rankings, which we saw as needlessly punitive. There was even a grumbled and rather oblique comparison between the evaluation policy and the famous line from the Maoist era about 5 per cent of the people always being counterrevolutionary, since singling out our bottom 10 per cent seemed equally arbitrary. Eventually, the public announcement of the bottom 10 per cent of employees was eliminated, although administrators are still required to submit ranking-order lists of faculty and staff to the human resources office.

The evaluation process for mid-level administrators is quite theatrical: we are required to give four-minute PowerPoint presentations on our major accomplishments of the year, with supporting charts and graphs, to our fellow administrators. Initially, the presentations were given to a very large audience including

36 By "open" I mean a substantive meeting that involves senior and mid-level administrators as well as faculty in relatively free discussion.

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all middle and senior administrators. Over the years, this format has changed somewhat, so that we now give our presentations to smaller groups comprising administrators at roughly comparable levels of responsibility. In practice, this means that library directors are now evaluating directors, vice-directors and Party secretaries from offices such as resources or housing or maintenance, the faculty union and so forth – all without the benefit of job descriptions or any hard data on actual performance. As each person gives his or her presentation, the audience fills out a Likert-scale form, rating our peers on *subjective* criteria including difficulty of work, quality of work, significance of work to the university, morality and teamwork spirit. On occasion, this is an entertaining process. The first year this system was used, deans were first to give the PowerPoint presentations. One of the university's key strategic curricular initiatives at the time focused on the development of critical thinking skills in our students. Most of the deans made sure to mention their college efforts and successes in this area, with appropriate data to demonstrate their students' growing ability for critical thinking. After the deans' presentations, various Party secretaries gave their presentations. The secretary in charge of faculty affairs noted how effective she had been in ensuring that all faculty members thought alike regarding Party directives. She was followed by the secretary in charge of student affairs, who noted how effective he had been in ensuring that all students also had a uniform perspective on Party doctrine. The irony of this cognitive dissonance evidently escaped a few people in the audience. In any case, this specific element of the personnel evaluation policy has been in force five years now, with only very minor changes.

To sum up, policymaking between universities and the party-state is controlled by the party-state, while policymaking within the university is controlled by the university leaders and the key bureaucracies (at the behest, directly or indirectly, of the party-state). The impact of the policymaking process within universities often leads, predictably, to a deterioration of enthusiasm and engagement among both faculty members and mid-level administrators, and passive resistance to the ill-conceived policies frequently developed by institutional bureaucracies.

## Conclusion

Faculty members and mid-level academic administrators face two fundamental problems in the development of educational quality and autonomy. First is the problem of dual administration identified in the discourse on administerization and de-administerization; real power is political and lies in the hands of the party-state. The party-state can intervene in academic development at any time to shift the focus towards ideology rather than the generation or transfer of knowledge. When I arrived in China in 2010, this source of authority was quiescent but certainly present in its share of the budget and the number of personnel on campus. As I write these lines in early 2019, the party-state has reasserted

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control over higher education. Visits from provincial inspection teams are more frequent and the outcomes of these visits can be substantial. The impact of this tightened control may be limited in the STEM fields, which primarily address the material development of the nation. However, in the arts, humanities and social sciences, students now learn less than they could or should in fields such as history, psychology, sociology, law, economics, philosophy and ethics, comparative literature or the creative arts. The impact of ideological reassertion – and a corresponding re-administerization – in these fields is significant and serves to retard the social and cultural development of the nation.

The second problem confronting faculty members and academic administrators arises from the outmoded but deeply ingrained hierarchical methods of traditional management practised by most senior university administrators. Of course, these management practices limit the academic autonomy of faculty and mid-level administrators. Worse, though, they simply waste much of the talent, creativity, energy, intellect and goodwill present on university campuses. Even if the national political winds reverse in the foreseeable future, mid-level academic administrators and faculty members are not likely to acquire new levels of autonomy or authority until university leaders modernize their management practices. To address the various issues raised in this paper, senior university leaders should draw on modern management practices to systematically consult relevant constituencies with the intention to construct more thoughtful, comprehensive, effective and sustainable university polices; develop more service-oriented bureaucracies and rein in petty bureaucrats with their tendency to "rule from a dominant position"; develop more transparent and stable practices for the allocation of resources; develop and professionalize task-oriented meetings and forego "informational" meetings; and create better communication channels between work units.

At present, the party-state and senior university officials are focused on national-level politics and ideology, with very little attention to the actual learning and teaching mission of the academy. Campuses are once again covered with red character slogans and political banners. Classes continue to get taught, although the issues, topics and subjects that can safely be covered in class shrink annually. Students can still get a good education at Chinese universities but this is owing only to the slow but forward moving inertial force generated by the faculty members. Faculty members and college-level administrators continue to keep their eyes on the educational mission. Meanwhile, advocates for de-administerization continue to call on the party-state and senior university officials to adopt a more modern, professional and service-oriented ethos.

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## Conflicts of interest

None.

## Biographical note

Terry BODENHORN served as a college dean, library director, and professor of modern Chinese history at a public university in China from June 2010 through July 2019.

**摘要:** 有关中国高等教育制度中的大学自治的研究在过去三十年来着重在党国和大学领导之间的关系。此篇论文的焦点在大学学校整体的管理做法和学院层级的学术自治权。基于在中国学术界有关"行政化"和"去行政化"的讨论，我们表明在高等教育制度中常见的双重行政系统和过时的管理方法是如何限制学院的学术品质和教育自治权。

**关键词:** 中国高等教育; 大学自治; 学院自治; 政策制定; 行政; 管理; 行政化; 去行政化。

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