

Who is the Gatekeeper of Academic Power for Chinese Universities?

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Introduction

Announced in early January and introduced by the Ministry of Education (MOE), the *Regulation on Academic Committees of Higher Educational Institutions* (hereinafter referred to as “the Regulation”) has become effective since 1 March 2014. Upon its announcement, the head of the MOE Department of Regulations and Policies specially wrote an article indicating that the Regulation is another major measure towards molding modern universities and institutionalizing university academic committees, so it would be of great significance in propelling professorial governance and in improving university governance structures (Sun 2014). The same article also identified the background to introduce the Regulation, which is the lack of norms on academic committee positioning and specific duties, the vague boundary between academic and administrative affairs, and the ambiguous relations between academic committees and other internal academic organizations. The Regulation is thus released with specific provisions concerning the committee’s significance, organizing rule and even its size, duty and responsibility, as well as the operational procedure. Therefore, in view of issuing the Regulation, the government appears to be the gatekeeper for scholars to execute academic power in China.

Discussions on Academic Power and Administrative Power within Chinese Universities

The relations between academic and administrative power within universities have been a hot issue in re-

cent years, which can be manifested by the mass publications of over 5,000 relevant articles in Chinese Journal Full-text Database (CJFD). Most of those articles were published in the last 10 years since 2006 (Data from Chinese Journal Full-text Database, by 25 November 2014). Academic power is defined as one kind of authority assumed by scholars, while administrative power is assumed by university administrators (Zhang 2002). The main concern is that a growing swell of administrative forces may squeeze academic power and various cases are observed. For instance, university presidents are ranked with bureaucrat status, and all university administrators are titled like government officials though Chinese universities are entitled legal status of independent corporate; meanwhile, the academic committee is regarded as an empty shell, let alone being the policy-maker, and professors have full enthusiasm to become head of university administrative offices. Such criticisms in the academia are quickly captured by the public, causing “de-bureaucratization” one of the most popular topics among the representatives and with the media during the annual conference of China’s national legislatures – NPC (National People’s Congress) and CPPCC (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) in the past couple of years. The Regulation is obviously outcome of the discussions arising in the university and the society. It seems that the MOE is trying to control the ever expanding administrative power in higher education institutions so as to safeguard the interests of scholars. In light of the Regulation, to what extent and how university academic committees exercise their power is generally the business of universities themselves. This scene that the government becomes the wheels of initiating concrete regulations with respect to academic authority is rarely seen in world higher education history.

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The Global Context of Reinforcing University Administration

To streamline university administration is not unique for Chinese universities, and evidences of this tendency may also been observed in many other countries. Massification of higher education and enhancement of social accountability of universities are the two main reasons behind this tendency. The massification and popularization of higher education profoundly changes the scale, structure and functions of modern universities. Universities are no longer ivory towers, but large-scale pluralistic organizations, namely Multiversity (Kerr 1994). Administrative work calls for the participation of more administrative professionals and other supportive personnel rather than being fully undertaken by academics as before. Therefore, two groups (faculty and administrative workers) and two kinds of ideas (the priority of academic power and the emphasis of administrative power) take shape in universities (Clark 1983; Wang 2007). The rising budget attributed to popularization of higher education and the fierce competition in a globalized world set universities face against the direct pressure and urgent demand of the government and the society with respect to efficiency and output. Only by responding to the external demands properly and standing out among a variety of direct or indirect evaluations can universities win better circumstances for themselves. This trend requires reinforcing university administration in order to stimulate the full capabilities of inner academic units within the university, but often lands on the pervasion of more administrative power in universities.

The Underlying Reasons for the Reinforcing Administrative Power in China

As part of global higher education community, Chinese universities are faced with common problems as their peers. The fast massification of higher education makes lots of Chinese universities (even the most research-oriented universities) expand multiple-fold in enrolment size, which complicates university governance. Fierce global competition also sends its ripples to the field of higher education as various global rankings

keep pricking the public. Higher education in China is constantly questioned as to its mismatch with China's economic power despite its short history of recovery and development, after the devastating Cultural Revolution. Government education officials and Chinese universities are also under great pressures ushered in by social accountabilities. Therefore, massification of higher education, compounded with the rising social accountability, served to reinforce administrative power in Chinese universities.

Apart from external reasons, there are internal reasons as well. The power structure is always dictated by resource allocations. The pattern of resource allocation in Chinese universities is directly responsible for heightening of administrative power. In China, most higher education institutions are public, receiving personnel, financial and material resources from the government. If the allocation of various resources is mandated by laws and regulations, people in charge of allocation are just executors without much power. However, if the allocation is distributed at random, universities will seek maximum interest by currying favor with allocation executors who are thus much empowered.

The current fund allocation for Chinese universities is mostly led by government administrators rather than legislators, which allows for the space of manipulations. For example, there is an amount of competitive appropriations among public allocation in Chinese higher education. To a certain extent, competitive appropriations do enhance the performance of higher education institutions by provoking competitions. However, if the appropriations are sizable and the process is not transparent, unfairness and power rent-seeking will likely result. In the past few years, the competitive appropriations including performance-based funding and program funding account for more than 50% of budgetary allocation for some universities that are directly under jurisdiction of China's central government (Internal Statistics of Chinese Ministry of Education). The competitive appropriations are always controlled by different government bureaus and even different divisions within those government bureaus, so the university has to enhance the inner administrative offices in order to network with bureaucracies for the purpose of getting a

better share. The administrative offices within a Chinese university always correspond to the divisions of government education bureau, and they know how to attract money controlled by the corresponding government divisions. When the competitive appropriation is allocated to a specific university, it is always the relevant university administrative officers who have power to decide how to distribute money among internal academic schools and departments. So it is understandable that the administrative power is so prevalent on campus, and professors want to assume administrative roles.

Is the Regulation the Needed Solution?

It can be concluded from the above analysis that the main reason for the ever growing administrative power in Chinese universities lies not in the dysfunction of academic committee but in the relations between government and universities, and the way of resources allocation. The Regulation cannot solve the problem of administrative power outweighing academic power. From the perspective of legislative entity and process, China's education authorities have crossed the line to formulate detailed rules in favor of public opinion. It disrupts the autonomy of the university again by not only deviating from its original intention but also further blurring the line between government and university discretions.

In China, there are currently 2,788 higher education institutions (Ministry of Education 2013), which are not specially categorized, but in practice cluster into tiers and groups. The Regulation that takes no institutional characteristics into consideration will come across lots of barriers when implemented. The *Higher Education Law* of 1998 prescribes the principles of the setting up of academic committee, which has been incorporated into practice in most higher education institutions, especially research-oriented ones, though sometimes taking various forms. What government should do is to urge higher education institutions to give full play to academic committees in various forms and to provide a supportive environment for their operations. It is hard to imagine that universities without autonomy can rectify the overemphasis on administrative power over academic power as well as other types of imbalances.

Conclusion: Who will keep Vigil of Academic Authority?

The governance of Chinese universities will be a hot topic for a long period in the foreseeable future. In recent years, many scholars propose that Chinese universities borrow the experiences of Western countries in terms of structure of higher education governance, such as the university governing board in North America. It needs to note that the role of these governing boards is not only underpinned by the structure itself but also the principle of rule of law. Chinese Communist Party recently puts forward "governance through rule of law" on the 4th Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in response to demand of the public, which will also extend to and affect higher education institutions in China. Only when rule of law rises above specific rules and regulations in the legislative process, the principle of rule of law can truly safeguard the academic power.

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