

The Changing Role of Governance in China's Higher Education System

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Abstract

Traditionally education in China has been subjected to rigorous central regulation by the Chinese government. During the last two decades it has undergone processes of decentralization to reduce centrally directed activity. This article is devoted to exploring the educational effects of higher education policy from the establishment of new China in 1953 to 2013. It uses multiple policy documents to critically examine the special features of Chinese higher education administrative system, which is represented as a strong sense of "state instrumentism", and analyzes the relationship between the central and provincial governments and higher educational institutions. With an analysis of policy texts, this study discusses the challenges that Chinese government confronts with while renovating its higher education and proposes strategies to address this challenging situation. Taking Guangdong government's policy as an example, this paper examines the role of the Guangdong provincial government in the process of renovating and developing local higher education.

1. Introduction

The context of globalization and economic modernization drive of 21st century has not only fostered market economy in China but also urges the Chinese central and provincial governments to restructure its higher educational system [17], [11], [16].

After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the post-Mao Chinese government has put much effort in economic development. Major fields in health, education, and housing went through the processes of marketization and privatization [15], [20]. The educational reforms of the last twenty years or so have been accompanied by significant changes in the role of government apparatus. These changes are especially clear if the system of Chinese higher education is compared with that of the Maoist period, when higher educational institutions (HEIs) were guided by a centralized political and administrative system.

However in this process, although the Chinese government was determined to change its role from bureaucratic government to supervision, integral tensions among various sectors and stakeholders often appeared [33]. Now there is far less direct

involvement of the government in HEIs because the higher education system gained more autonomy. Tremendous changes have taken place in the relation between HEIs and the government. While these changes are considerable, it is still the case that policy-makers are wrestling with that the correct role of the state government, the provincial government, and HEIs in overseeing the Chinese higher education institutions. University autonomy might conflict with politicians' interest in regulating higher education. In addition, inconsistent government policy texts may turn into negative forces that hinder HEI development [32]. Thus, weakening the government's administrative control over HEIs and adjusting its relations with HEIs are still a main concern in reforming the Chinese higher education system.

2. Theoretical framework

Trow's [19], [20] theory explained the phenomenon that higher education of modern China has undergone during China's transition from planned economy to market economy. Trow [19] proposed a concept of "phases of development" as a base for understanding development in higher education, which involves a transition from one phase to the next. These changes are usually accompanied by special strains and tensions at the point of transition. Usually the system of higher education could not achieve a complete transition from one phase to another, but exhibited hybrid characteristics. State authority, academic institutions and the market need to coordinate in order to improve higher education system [3].

3. Research questions and purpose

Under the planned economy system, the institutions of higher learning in China develop under the wings of central government. Specifically, higher education is characterized by rigorous regulation. The government controls the development of colleges and universities in significant detailed ways. The development of economy and advancement of science and technology has transformed the relationship between the government and HEIs [14]. The colleges and universities gradually come out of the "ivory tower",

but the “visible hand” of government still unavoidably intervenes their development. This is clearly contrary to the inherent logic of university development and leads to research questions guided this study:

- How does the Chinese government adjust its relationship with HEIs in the past thirty years?
- How does Guangdong Provincial government establish and improve the system of local higher education?
- How can the government and HEIs address the challenges encountered during educational reform?

4. Method

To explore our research questions, this study uses qualitative case study method [13] in order to systematically inquire into the relationship between the Guangzhou provincial government and local higher education. Using critical policy analysis approach [29], this study will reflect the context and background of contemporary higher education and describe in depth the meaning behind each policy text [23], [27]. Chinese colleges and universities develop better when the government emphasizes greater autonomy [18], which is commonly understood as freedom and capacity to act in university levels [12], [15], [32]

5. Data sources and analysis

The qualitative and interpretive research paradigm focuses on meaning in governmental and Guangdong provincial policy texts. Data came from policy from the year 1953 to 2010 in three different periods. To analyze the data, we drew from the methods of constant comparison [2].

The balance of power structure between the Chinese government and HEIs is subject to the influence of China’s cultural tradition, especially its history. From the whole history of HEI development, university autonomy and government control is like a cycle of pendulum. Social, political, economic and cultural change always causes the revision and replacement of education policy [10]. Power structure is also subject to different policy choices. With the revision and change of relevant policy texts, the independent right of China HEIs has experienced ups and downs, which converts from government centralization, to decentralization, and recently to government re-regulation. Each period of transformation is influenced by rich symbolic policy texts.

Guangdong provincial government took the lead in releasing new educational policy to reconstruct university governance structure. The government gave a considerable degree of independence for local

higher education. It introduced performance measures such as regularly administered standardized national tests to promote the level of higher education and issued quality indicators to strengthen accountability assessment. However, there is a problem worthy of exploration. The new provincial policy seems to be complementary to the development of Guangdong HEIs, yet paradoxically it reflects dilemmas that government confronts as a result of new forms of regulation being established. The balance between higher education autonomy and state control is obviously important but what is exactly at stake if we discuss the tension and balance between the two? The study explains the reasons behind the policy game, and explores the path of university governance and the direction of Chinese higher education.

5.1. The changing role of governance

The development of university autonomy is developed in three stages. In the first period (1949-1977), the government took highly centralized approach to manage higher education during the planned economy period. The Government Affairs Council published Decisions about the Leadership Relationship with Higher Education and stated “national higher education institutions are administered by the central people’s government.” In 1953, this decision determined that the government role in directly regulating 148 HEIs across the state. In 1965, the government published a new policy On Strengthening the Unified Leadership of Higher Education and the Decision of A Hierarchical Management. The government classified its leadership and management system into four levels, which are central, provincial, municipal and autonomous regional governance [8]. This policy laid a foundation for highly centralized regulation system in higher education. The centralization tendency reflected the characteristics of the socialist planned economy. The central government made the basic guidelines and policies for HEIs and uniformly administered higher education system.

Since the end of the Mao era (1949-1976), the higher education system had been under review by the government. In the second stage, reforms and renovations in education had been introduced to adapt to the needs of industrialization, marketization and expectations of Chinese society. In 1985, the government promulgated The Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of Educational Structure and proposed “to reform the management system, implement decentralization, and expand school autonomy.” This policy was the first comprehensive reform of Chinese education [15]. Its main goal was to eliminate excessive government control over schools and HEIs. The government expanded school

autonomy from six aspects, which indicates a new pattern of management is established, from where colleges and universities could participate in decision-making and management.

In 1992, the Mission Outline of the Reform and Development of China's Education was issued to further reduce government's over-centralization and bureaucratic control. The policy announced, "to carry on the higher education system reform, adjust the relationship between the government and higher education institutions, and gradually establish the government macro-supervision system, schools run independently to satisfy society's needs" [4]. With the promulgation of Higher Education Law in 1998, the law protected the independent right of schools. The Higher Education Law stipulates that in accordance with laws and relevant rules of the State, HEIs may "independently regulate the percentage of admission", "independently set up and adjust subjects", "independently work out teaching plans, select and compile textbooks and organize activities of imparting teaching", "independently conduct scientific research, technological development and social services", "independently carry out scientific, technological and cultural exchanges and cooperation with foreign institutions of higher learning", "independently decide on the employment and other personnel affairs in the organization", "independently administer and use the property provided by the sponsor(s), state financial subsidy and properties donated and granted in accordance with laws". Regarding the internal affairs, the law defined the scope of decision-making for HEIs. In terms of external affairs, the government coordinated its relationship with school administrators, holders, and operators, and gradually weakened its control. The government and universities shared administrative duties and responsibilities. In the administrative affairs, the university has more right to say.

The third stage is government's latest effort in initiating the National Outline for Medium and Long Term Educational Reform and Development (Year 2010-2020) (hereafter the Outline) [28], a ten-year roadmap for educational reform. The government issued a draft version in early 2010 for public consultation, inviting suggestions and feedback from multiple stakeholders and the public so as to develop a comprehensive policy to aid the reform of higher education. The government pledged that it would promote university autonomy and self-management by granting more flexibility in areas such as teaching and learning activities, scientific research, technology exploration, and human resources management so long as they contribute to the development of HEIs without attempting to challenge government's ultimate authority. The outline signaled government's intent to reduce its

direct participation and control over higher education system.

The Outline pointed out "the education system and mechanism is not well structured, and the school is lack of vitality"; the government must "implement and expand school autonomy, and define government's administrative rights and responsibilities"; colleges and universities should "explore different types of education and develop talent school management system. Schools should improve performance management mechanism, and accept the supervision of teachers, students, and the public." Comparing to the past, the government not only emphasized the expansion of autonomy, but more focused on the actual implementation of school autonomy. As a developing country, the government had granted universities autonomy to catch up with the knowledge economy era. At the same time, it also expected colleges and universities to take more social responsibilities. The Outline signified a shift from strong hierarchical educational system to local autonomy including an expansion in the numbers of actors influencing education.

Nowadays, with the acceleration of social transformation, the higher education also accelerated its pace of reform. On one hand, the formulation of policy text transformed the relationship between HEIs and the government. On the other hand, due to the deep-rooted authoritarian consciousness, the government used to consider HEIs as affiliated institutions, and always had direct, comprehensive and strong control over it. A consequence of enhanced freedom and autonomy caused the central government to lose its grip. Although the government has focused on adjusting its relationship with HEIs since the 1980s, the structural framework had only been adjusted to a certain extent. The government is trying to find a balance between local autonomy and state control. The adjustments of the relationship between them will still be the main task for the reform in administrative system of Chinese higher education in the future.

5.2. The balance between the independence of HEIs and the power of the government

The manifestation of the policy texts at different times is not a simple behavior of the government, but a balance and readjustment process between the government and HEIs [24]. HEIs are an academic community, and the logical starting point of its development is academic freedom. The university focuses on "the pursuit of truth" and "knowledge transfer" therefore it is strived for realizing an ideal state in human society rather than focusing on the real life situation [15]. As a public authority, the government's mission is to maintain stable and

sustainable development of social economy, provide sufficient funding and institutional guarantee for the development of HEIs, so the value orientation is pragmatic, utilitarian, and political. It is more concerned about how many talents can HEIs cultivate, and how can HEI graduates create social and economic products. The government regulation focuses on the “cost-benefit” or “input-output” model in the market economy.

Objectively speaking, the value and the pursuit of universities and the government are in line with its role, since the responsibility of HEIs lies in exploring human knowledge and long-term benefit for the mankind. It needs to maintain its own internal logic, which is to pursue autonomy and academic freedom so as to maintain its vitality. But without macro-regulation and coordination of the government, the university “autonomy” is significantly missing intrinsic motivation and not knowing its functional directions. In addition, if HEIs lack of financial support from the government, it is difficult to seek their own development and growth, not to mention their autonomy. Thus HEIs do not want to separate from the government completely, but expecting more autonomy and independence, while the government hopes HEIs to be more financially self-sufficient, but does not want to reduce its authority in terms of operation of HEIs. Therefore achieving a balance of powers between the government and HEIs has become a major challenge for school autonomy reform. If the government gains more power, the HEIs are prone to have a non-sustainable and utilitarian oriented style of development. If the power decentralizes, the HEIs may divorce itself from the masses and from the reality and act blindly. For example, local autonomy can efficiently cause social inequality and unequal access to education [8]. So how can the government adjust its relationship with HEIs? How much right should HEIs receive? In reality, factors that affect the university autonomy process are complex, including the level of economic development, local government officials’ ideas, the degree of democracy, and the national quality. Although the Guangdong provincial government attempted to initiate reforms in Guangdong higher education in terms of structure and mechanism based on the Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (Guangdong Province 2010-2020) and the relevant policy text, it has to use the central political decision making to frame local autonomy. Paradoxically, the policy of autonomy seemed to increase government’s control.

It is understandable that the decentralization process takes a long time. It is a power game among various stakeholders and an outcome of numerous collisions. The system with higher benefits will ultimately replace the system yielding lower earnings [22]. In the power balancing process, the relationship between the government and HEIs is changed from

highly centralized to relatively decentralized. The power is distributed to a wide range of actors involved in education, such as HEIs, society, welfare professionals and individuals (see Figure 1, the power distribution in social transition period). With the exploration of higher education mechanism, school autonomy has made considerable progress: the power structure is more diversified; the power allocations tend to be reasonable; the responsibility of each role is more specific and reasonable; the role of the central government transformed from direct, authoritarian intervention to supervision and guidance. But new issues continue to rise: the local government interferes too much in HEIs but lacks of corresponding responsibilities; the voice of the society and the public is marginalized; the invisible manipulative rules are even more strongly affected the development of HEIs, such as the National Key discipline with the “Guo Zi Hao” (国字号) created a non-liberal academic ecological environment and being as an executive order guiding and restraining free academic development.

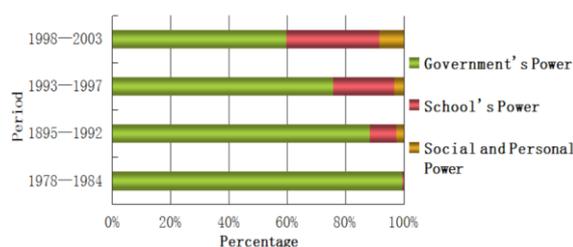


Figure 1. The power distribution of different institutions in higher education system

5.3. The Guangdong case and policy text analysis

The governance theory [6] was produced in the 1990s, which is one of the important theoretical explanations of the government, market and social relations. As a mode of governance reform, the essence of the theory is to readjust the relationship between the government and HEIs, and to reshape the governance from control to supervision. The theory proposed that the governance structure should be diversified; the main powers should establish dependency; and HEIs need to construct autonomous self-management network system.

With the guidance of the governance theory, Guangdong provincial government issued A notice On the Further Expansion and Promotion of the Implementation of Higher Education Autonomy to Accelerate HE Development (2013, hereinafter referred to as Decentralization) and Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Higher Education from Four Aspects (Higher Education in Guangdong Province: A Plan of Strong School Innovation Project Trial, 2013, hereinafter referred to as Opinions). The Decentralization is composed of 12

terms, which respectively refer to student enrollment, teaching reform, domestic and international exchanges and cooperation, collaborative innovation, job management, talented personnel development, educational investment, social capital introduction, financial support, external environment construction and internal management. The main goal of Decentralization is to enhance school autonomy and promote the development of HEIs. The Opinions is intended to further promote the “innovative strong school project”, and designed specific goals regarding key subject, talent personnel, platform, and major research projects in HEIs. It is proposed that one or two universities in Guangdong province will rank into the top five universities in the state in 2018; four to six universities will rank into the top five similar institutions in the nation; and the overall strength of HEIs in Guangdong province will achieve advanced ranks. The Guangdong province accounts for 5.6% of HEIs in the state with 73 public schools and 20 private comparing to 1,683 HEIs with 1,469 public and 214 private schools in the state. Hebei province, where the Peking and Tsinghua Universities locate accounts for 5.2%, and Shanghai accounts for 3.4% [12]. Thus it is worthwhile to analyze Guangdong’s policy texts and use it as a case to inform higher education reform.

Coincidentally, the two policy texts were published almost on the same day. The Opinions was published on July 11 and the Decentralization was on July 12 in 2013. It appeared that the contents in the two documents were consistent, but in nature they were conflicting. The Decentralization supported university autonomy and suggested HEIs to take charge of student enrollment and discipline construction, while the Opinions put forward specific requirements and goals for HEIs in terms of the construction of key discipline and personnel allocation, which reflects the provincial government’s deep-seated concept of regulation that uses the “administrative logic” to guide academic development. To put in a Chinese proverb, the Guangdong government’s behavior is to help HEIs get a ride on a horse but still seizing the bridle tightly. The Opinions indicated that the independent development of HEIs was not assured and not fully implemented. The provincial government reclaimed its control using means such as goal setting, performance measurement, and quality indicator assessment.

Drawing on the core governance theory, the following chart will present the contradicted philosophy of HEI development according to Decentralization and Opinion policy documents from four aspects: discipline construction, scientific research, fund allocation, regulation and supervision to elaborate the paradox in the policy texts.

In the management process, the Decentralization suggested that HEIs had more freedom to recruit

students and construct subjects and disciplines, and the government introduced supervision from the external actors in order to build a fair and sustainable education system. While the Opinions indicated a pyramid power structure [30] from the government to HEIs is appropriate. The Guangdong government had direct political authority to issue orders, make plans and design development goals, therefore HEIs have to implement the administrative instructions of the government to a great extent. The main idea of the two policy texts shares big discrepancy. Some Chinese educators believe that the reason why HEIs cannot refrain from the political influence is because it has to seek financial support from the government. The root cause behind the contradictions reflects the government’s long-term struggle and adjustment concerning its role in higher education system.

6. Result

Through the data analysis, it is concluded that with the acceleration of social transformation after 1980s, the central government and HEIs also accelerated their pace of reform. On the one hand, successive policy documents in the 1990s changed their long-formed master and servant relationship; on the other hand, due to the deep-rooted authoritarian consciousness, the government still regarded colleges and universities as its subordinate institutions, meaning the government has direct and comprehensive control on almost all the procedural and substantial matters of HEIs. The relationship between HEIs and the government in the administrative system of higher education could be considered as the one between higher authorities and lower authorities.

Although the Guangdong provincial government and colleges and universities created a Long Term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020), and the government decentralization reform also made great achievements, in the “experimental field” this reform has not yet fundamentally got rid of the influence of political interests and needs. Universities are inevitably positioned in politics and instrumental and utilitarian social background. The administrative relation between the government and HEIs has not had substantial changes since the HEIs are still subordinate or affiliated to the government either in form or in essence [12]. During the process of higher education reform, the government was involved into a state of confusion and contradiction. The government was puzzled with how much right HEIs should receive and how they should implement its autonomy in order not to challenge its ultimate authority. The objectives of government policies can be stated in explicit and implicit dichotomy [1]. Explicitly, the government wants to decentralize its regulation, but implicitly, it is intended to intensify

its governance and ensure the development path of the state.

7. Discussion and recommendation

Education reform in China can be regarded as a top-down process. However, HEIs and the government have constructed a complex and contradictory relationship that leads to a renovation dilemma [10]. The government initiated new forms of soft regulation and invited a range of actors to participate in the renovation of higher education. But it was challenging for the government to step back and allow other parties or interests to play a primary role in educational reform. Yeo's [31] study suggested that the reform process in China is complex, not to mention complications arising from a multitude of stakeholders, agents and their interactions within the government and higher education system. In light of the analysis above, this study proposed four suggestions in order to address the challenges and improve the quality of China's higher education system, which might help policy makers and educators.

Firstly, the Chinese government should clarify its power boundary with HEIs, and specify what the government can do, should do, must do, and vice versa. On some occasions, it is legitimate for the government to intervene into the higher education system, but it does not mean that the government has complete control. A blurred power boundary or excessive administrative power might kill the initiative and enthusiasm of HEIs. Therefore, there must be a fundamental transformation in government's function and intervention style. The government should seek a balanced power structure with HEIs and other actors. The government intervention should be limited to the field of external affairs, for example, the child's equal access to higher education, educational quality assurance, and the protection of student right to education, but not to interfere the internal academic freedom of HEIs. The government has an obligation to provide educational opportunities for citizens and guarantee their equal access to education, but this does not mean that the government can decide what education HEIs should give to students. HEIs should be the one who decides the contents and methods of higher education, and that's the right way to enhance Chinese education and academic innovation. In short, the government should shift its role from state-control to state-supervision [5], [30], and allow HEIs to establish an independent autonomous network system.

Secondly, the government needs to improve the policy-making system, and enhance the quality of communication and cooperation with HEIs. The making of education policy is a choice of value system for the government. Its essence is to adjust the distribution of educational benefits. With the

effort of expanding the implementation of university autonomy, the government needs to establish an equal partnership with HEIs, and make policies that support equal power distribution. In the policy-making process the government should have a full vision in the development of each stage. At the policy planning stage, the government needs to consider the basic function and purpose of policy making, which is to expand and implement university autonomy. According to the incremental model [25], it is necessary for the government to make sure the continuity of policy evolutions: first, the provincial government's policy should be in line with the state central policy; and second, the new policy should be consistent with the existing policy. Lastly, the local and central government should reach a consensus that autonomy and academic freedom can eventually help higher education development. In the participatory decision-making process, the government should involve HEIs and social intermediary organizations' decision-making, as well as foreign organizations' suggestions and feedback to make collective decisions. Furthermore, the social organizations can be an organic combination of the higher education system. The government and HEIs can operate in coexistence with other actors.

Thirdly, the government needs to formulate laws and legislative procedures to safeguard the implementation of university autonomy. Education has long been operating in a stressed environment that HEIs act in compliance with the government policy. The survival and development of universities has been subject to many restrictions and obstacles because of the lack of sound policies, laws and regulations. It is suggested that the College Board should make major decisions and scientific conclusions of the legislation instead of the government. HEIs should develop principal selection system to recruit professional principals [9]. HEIs should improve the functions of the Academic Committee, and balance the political, academic and administrative powers. In addition, the policy needs to further reinforce the university status, and safeguard the independent right of HEIs. In this way, the relationship between the government and HEIs can be rationalized and reconstructed.

Fourthly, it is essential to assert the social organization's position and form multilateral governance. Nowadays, it is necessary to establish a dynamic power diversification mechanism among the government, HEIs, the society and market in order to have more flexibility to adapt to complex environments. Even though the central government starts the higher education reform, scholars in China studies are doubtful whether measures can be implemented, since historical evidence shows that the implementation deficit is commonly found when new policies are introduced, compounded by

variations and totally different responses in municipal and local levels [15]. Thus the participation of third-party organizations from the community, business field, or non-governmental organizations through objective assessment and evaluation can decrease rampant corruption, enhance collaborative innovation, and promote the transformation of the governance structure of HEIs [30].

8. Scholarly significance of the study

A comparison of the contradictions of policy documents in Guangdong province is relatively limited in educational research. The article offered new insights for understanding the China's higher education system from the historical accounts, and explained the nature and operation of university autonomy and government control. Using a case study method, the study illuminated a dynamic process of Guangdong government's decentralization and re-regulation and the relationship between the government and HEIs. The article showed how the policy texts can be incongruent, and how confused the university when choosing a way to develop and reform.

The study proposed that the logical direction of China's higher education modernization is to change the governance structure and establish a modern university system. From the perspective of policy texts, this study examined the government's role in higher education system and analysed the internal conflicts and contradictions in the policy texts. In the process of education reform, the government is walking in a dilemma of decentralization and re-regulation. In order to address challenges that HEIs and the government face, this paper proposed four suggestions: the government needs to clarify its role and boundary with HEIs; the government and HEIs need to establish equal partnership in order to expand and implement university autonomy; the state needs to establish and revise laws and legislative procedures to protect and enhance the independent right of colleges and universities; and lastly, the government needs to widen the range of actors involved in education.

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