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Institutional autonomy and social accountability: the dilemma facing Chinese universities in an Era of higher education massification

WANG Libing

Introduction

Institutional autonomy and social accountability have been the two kinds of arguments that have been used in different backgrounds, by different groups of people and for different purposes. The argument for institutional autonomy almost came with the establishment of the medieval universities in western countries when the university community in its early stage was very small in size and population and financed exclusively by non-governmental sources such as donation and tuition fees. Throughout the most part of university history, outside interferences had long been seen as unacceptable on the part of the university community. It could be argued that university was born with autonomous nature in history and institutional autonomy is not something that had been added to university later on.



However, universities could not isolate themselves from the outside world, especially when they were no longer small in size and increasingly relied on government funding. There were increasing arguments for social accountability of the universities on the part of the government. There was once an institutional arrangement in the UK when the government started public funding for universities in 1919, which was to establish a buffer organization called University Grants Committee (UGC) to report the financial demands of the universities to the government and administer the allocation of government grants among universities. But as the higher education system expanded, the UGC was restructured to reflect more of the government concerns. Institutional autonomy had given way to social accountability and more assessment in teaching and research had been introduced and conducted by higher education funding agencies.

In the case of China, although the tradition of higher education system is quite different, these two arguments could also apply in analyzing the recent development of higher education since 1999 when China started its higher education expansion campaign.

The Expansion of Higher Education

Although China has the world's largest population, its higher education system had remained relatively small in terms of gross enrollment ratio (GER) before 1998. According to statistics, when the new China was founded in 1949, the total number of HEIs was 205 with a total enrollment of 116,000 students (MOE, China, 1999a: 359). During the following half century, China had achieved tremendous progress in rebuilding its higher education system. By 1998, the total number of HEIs in China reached 1022 with total enrollment of 3,408,700 undergraduate students (MOE, China, 1999b).

However, the gross enrollment ratios (GER) of higher education in China had stayed at a very low level despite the steady increases in the total enrollment of university and college students before 1998. Table below shows that the GER figures started at 3.4% in 1990 and increased in the years through 1998. In 1998, a year before the mass higher education (MHE) process started, the GER of higher education in China was still 9%, which reflects the elite nature of Chinese higher education system.

Gross enrollment ratio of higher education in China, 1990-1998

Year	GER(%)	Year	GER(%)
1990	3.4	1995	7.2
1991	3.5	1996	8.3
1992	3.9	1997	9.1
1993	5	1998	9.8
1994	6		

Source: 'Gross Enrolment Rate of Schools and Colleges by Level'. Retrieved 22 June 2005, from <http://www.moe.gov.cn/edoas/website18/level3.jsp?tablename=1051&infoid=11604>

In 1998 Mr. Zhu Rongji was appointed as Chinese Prime Minister. The new Chinese leadership recognized higher education as one of the priority areas of the national plan for the revitalization of the country. There was also a strong consensus in China that from a strategic point of view, the expansion of higher education could provide the country with a bigger pool of highly qualified and professional human resources, which would greatly contribute to the healthy and sustainable social and economic development in China (Kang, 2002). But perhaps the most direct impetus for the expansion of higher education in China was the impact of 1998 Asia Financial Crisis in which export-oriented industries were severely affected. Strong social demand for higher education could be utilized and turned into domestic demands through the expansion of higher education to offset the negative impact of the Asia Financial Crisis on the country's economy.

In June 1999, Chinese Prime Minister Mr. Zhu Rongji announced the government's decision to substantially increase the total enrollment of new students in universities and colleges in 1999. The total number of new students to be enrolled nationally would be 1.537 million (the actual figure is 1.59million) in 1999, more than 41.7% increase compared with the figure of 1.08 million in 1998 (Kang, 2002). It was a historic moment in the history of Chinese higher education, which marked the beginning of an unprecedented period of higher education expansion.

Due to the implementation of expansion policy in higher education since 1999, the enrollment of new university and college students in China have kept soaring every year. In 1998, a year before the start of the expansion process, the enrollment of new university and college students in China was 1.08 million. In 2004, the figure reached 4.5 million. Table below illustrates the increase in the enrollment of new university and college students in China over the last 7 years.

The enrollment of new university and college students in China, 1998-2004

Year	Enrollment of new students
1998	1,080,000
1999	1,590,000
2000	2,200,000
2001	2,682,800
2002	3,200,000
2003	3,820,000
2004	4,473,400

Source: MOE, China, National Statistics on Education, 1998-2005. www.moe.edu.cn

Meanwhile, the GER of higher education in China had also been growing at the same period of time. Table below shows the growth of GER of higher education in China from 1998 to 2004. In 2002, the GER figure in China reached 15%, a threshold for mass higher education set by Martin Trow.

The growth of gross enrolment ratio of higher education in China, 1998-2004

Year	Gross Enrolment Ratio(%)
1998	9.8
1999	10.5
2000	12.5
2001	13.3
2002	15
2003	17
2004	19

Source: MOE. Gross Enrolment Ratio of Regular Schools by Level. <http://www.moe.gov.cn/>

Mi and Liu (2002) argued that 10% and 20% of GER could be regarded as the starting point and ending point of the process towards mass higher education. Table below shows the development of mass higher education in selected countries.

Country	Starting year	GER(%)	Finishing year	GER(%)	Years	Average annual increase rate(%)
U.S.A	1930	9.60	1950	20.01	20	3.8
Philippines	1950	10.0	1970	19.94	20	3.5
France	1961	9.97	1974	20.35	13	3.6
Japan	1964	10.99	1974	20.74	10	6.6
Italy	1965	10.75	1973	20.94	8	8.7
Germany	1968	10.87	1977	20.70	9	7.0
Cuba	1975	10.97	1985	20.00	10	6.3
R. Korea	1976	9.98	1982	21.70	6	13.8
Thailand	1979	11.0	1985	20.00	6	10.5

Source: Mi & Liu (2002)

The Demand for Institutional Autonomy

Higher education in China had little tradition of institutional autonomy. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, higher education system had been mainly restructured according to the Soviet model and had been highly centralized. Universities and colleges had just been subordinate units of their superior administrations (MOE and other central government departments for national universities and provincial education authorities for local universities). Universities and colleges had little power over their internal affairs such as the approval of study programs, the promotion of professional staff, students' enrollment policies, the awarding of degrees, international exchange and cooperation, etc. The total bureaucratization of higher education system had been linked by Tang and Xue (1994) with the highly centralized and state-planning system of the country since 1949.

Compared with the development of institutional autonomy in western countries, Bie Dunrong (1999) argued that the tradition of institutional autonomy has been rooted for a long history in western countries and has been an intrinsic feature of their higher education system, while in China the argument for institutional autonomy has just been raised in the late period of the development of its higher education system. Indeed the issue of institutional autonomy for universities and colleges had not been on the government agenda until mid-1980s when China accelerated its pace of market-oriented economic reforms throughout the country. In 1985, the ruling Communist Party issued a policy document on education reforms in which institutional autonomy was officially proposed for the first time. As Xiong Qingnian (2004) rightly put it, the reason behind the new proposal was mainly economic consideration, rather than from the point of view of academic freedom as it was usually the case in western countries. In the policy document, it was stated that over-centralization and bureaucratization of higher education would devitalize HEIs and make them unable to actively respond to the changing needs of social and economic development of the country. The purpose of granting more institutional autonomy for universities and colleges was to revitalize HEIs by strengthening their links with industries, research and other walks of social life.

In 1993, the Chinese government published an *Outline of Chinese Education Reforms and Development*, which reiterated the government's intention to promote institutional autonomy by stating that the relationship between the government and HEIs should be based on the principle of the political and professional separation. The boundary of powers and responsibilities between the government and HEIs would be clearly defined through legislation so that HEIs could be corporate bodies to make them more responsive to the needs of the society.

The *Higher Education Act of the People's Republic of China*, which came into effect on January 1 1999, was the legislative outcome of the government intention to promote institutional autonomy. According to the Act, higher education institution in China should be a corporate body with the president to act as its legal representative (Article 30). Also in this Act, seven areas of institutional autonomy were outlined for universities and colleges, which include

- HEIs could independently restructure their study programs and approve new study programs (Article 33).
- HEIs could independently decide on student enrollment policies according to the social demand, their own capacities and government quotas (Article 32).
- HEIs could independently organize their teaching activities according to the demand of students, including independently deciding their own teaching plans and the choosing of textbooks (Article 34).
- HEIs could independently organize their activities in research, development and social service according to their own capacities (Article 35).
- HEIs could independently conduct international exchange and cooperation programs with foreign HEIs, provided that these activities do not violate the law and policies of the government (Article 36).

- HEIs could independently decide on their internal organizational structures based on the principles of efficiency, and staff policies according to the government guideline (Article 37).
- HEIs could independently manage and allocate their incomes either from government or from other sources provided that the earmarked grants for teaching and research are not used for other purposes (Article 38).

It is clear from the official point of view in China that university institutional autonomy should be carried out over the above-mentioned seven areas, which had been highly relevant to the new development of higher education expansion in China since 1999. Higher education expansion requires more decentralization and devolution of more powers and responsibilities to universities and colleges. Otherwise the expanded higher education system would be unmanageable and also be insensitive to the rapid changing needs of the society. This has been especially the case with regard to the restructuring of study programs, which has been regarded as one of the main areas of institutional autonomy. Before 2002, national universities and colleges were required to report their proposals of setting up new study programs within the national subject catalogue to the Ministry of Education for its approval and the whole process could take about a year to finish. In 2002, the Chinese Ministry of Education announced its decision to grant six top universities including Peking University, Tsinghua University, Zhejiang University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Beijing Normal University and Wuhan University with the power of approving new study programs at undergraduate level within or outside the national subject catalogue. This marked the start of real change in the development of institutional autonomy for Chinese universities.

Another important development has been concerned with the university admission policies. In 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Education launched a pilot project to give 22 universities and colleges throughout the country with the power to independently recruit certain proportion of students. The quota of students recruited independently by universities and colleges would not exceed 5% of their annual intakes of students. For this proportion of students, pilot universities and colleges had been allowed to set their own admission requirements and enrollment procedures, and recruit secondary school graduates either according to their university entrance examination results or based on their academic performance during their period at secondary schools. This means that along with the traditional higher education entrance examinations, which were organized initially by the national educational authority and recently devolved to be the responsibilities of local education authorities in some provinces, universities and colleges began to have a certain degree of power to decide on their admission policies. It is expected that with the gradual increase in the number of universities and colleges and expansion of the proportion of students, institutional autonomy in student enrollment policies will be greatly expanded, which may lead to the fundamental reforms of the existing Chinese higher education entrance examination system in the future.

Institutional autonomy had also seen substantial progress in other areas. For example, top universities in China had been granted the powers to establish international links with foreign countries, hold international conference, and approve the issuance of visas to foreign visitors. They could also have more autonomy in deciding the modalities of studies, the duration of certain study programs, staff policies, internal organization structures, internal funding policies, etc.

It should be pointed out that in China although the principle of institutional autonomy of universities has clearly been stated in national legislations, the boundary of powers and responsibilities between the government and HEIs has not been well defined. Moreover, institutional autonomy is not unconditional and would largely depend on the university capacity in management skills, self-reflection and self-regulation cultures and the sensitivity to the needs of society. All these could not be reached overnight. Devolution of powers and responsibilities to universities and colleges should be duly paced in area and content, which would pose a big challenge for the Chinese government in the years ahead.

The Demand for Social Accountability

The demand for social accountability of universities is not new in China. But it has had different meanings in different periods of development since 1949. For a long period of time, HEIs had been part of the government institutions with the missions to serve the political and economic needs of the country, which were intended and planned by the government. Therefore, the social accountability of the universities had been to practice what the government wanted and no other activities were needed on the part of universities. The government-dominant nature of social accountability had made the government the major recipient of university teaching and research services, which tended to be focused on the political and cultural function of the universities and was mainly concentrated on basic research, which did not necessarily reflect the immediate needs of the society.

After China's transition towards market-oriented economy since the 1980's, the demand for social accountability of universities has changed to making universities more accountable to the multiple customers of their services, including the government, public and private industries and the local communities. According to the *Higher Education Act of People's Republic of China*, financing higher education remains the responsibility of the government but allows multiple-source funding to come and supplement the gaps. It was believed that during the massification process of higher education, universities and colleges should finance their full operation by providing services not only to the government, but also to the industries and local communities as well. There has been a growing tendency of diversified sources of incomes in Chinese universities and colleges with decreased proportion of incomes received from the government.

The demand of social accountability of universities was given new impetus when China started its higher education expansion campaign from 1999. In an era of mass higher education, the employability of university graduates, social relevance of study programs, demand-driven research and development projects and the quality of higher education provision has been seen as the important indicators of social accountability of universities in China.

In 1999, the Chinese Ministry of Education started to publish annual national league table on the employment rates of university graduates, with the intention of making universities more accountable to the students who paid for their studies in the universities. It was also seen as one of the government's attempts to introduce more market mechanism into the assessment of university performance. In 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued *Some Guidelines on the Employment of University Graduates*, which stated that HEIs should be accountable to the social demands for various types of professionals and skilled workforces. The document provided that universities and local education authorities should take into account the employment of graduates when conducting their strategic planning. HEIs should restructure their study programs based on the projection of the employment market and the actual demands of the society. The employment rate of the university graduates would be included as one of the major indicators to assess the structure of study programs and decide the allocations of enrollment quotas of universities and departments in the following academic year. Study programs with employment rates below the local average for three successive years would be asked to reduce their annual intakes of students.

The government has made it clear that the higher education expansion should be market-driven and employment-oriented and should be focused on contributing to the local economic and social development. Courses offered should be based on the needs of local employment market. Universities should be encouraged to establish strong partnerships with local industries when undertaking their teaching and research. It had also been believed that as China is becoming one of the world's major manufacturing centers, the development of higher technical and vocational education could help increase the supply of skilled workers. In December 2004, the Ministry of Education issued *Category of Courses for Higher Technical and Vocational Education* to further restructure the higher technical and vocational courses in order to serve the needs of economic development with highly qualified and skilled workforces.

Universities have been encouraged to restructure their internal research organizations based on demands of society. Traditionally, the establishment of research units within Chinese universities had been mainly discipline-driven and always single-disciplinary in nature. However, as the research income from non-governmental sources has been on the increase, more and more multi-disciplinary and demand-driven research units have been established to balance self-research and contract research in universities. Universities are also encouraged to establish joint research institutes with industries, governments and international organizations.

Does quantitative expansion always come with declining quality? This has been the most frequently mentioned question and also one of the toughest challenges facing China since the start of its higher education expansion campaign. International experience suggested that there should be quality assurance arrangements to accompany the expansion of higher education so that the expansion would not be at the expense of quality.

Founded in August 2004, the Chinese National Higher Education Evaluation Center (NHEEC) is a semi-governmental national higher education quality assurance authority under the direct leadership of the Ministry of Education. It is responsible for organizing national teaching evaluation, undertaking policy-related research on teaching reforms and teaching evaluation, and promoting international exchange and cooperation in higher education evaluation. (NHEEC, 2004). The founding of the NHEEC has been China's attempt to introduce a professional organization for higher education evaluation.

In 2003, the Ministry of Education introduced Quinquennial National Teaching Evaluation Exercise (QNTEE). The first round of the QNTEE evaluation started in 2005 and is now being implemented by NHEEC. Various panels of evaluation experts were established and a national workshop on the methodology of the evaluation was held in late March and early April 2005. A set of benchmarking indicators has also been released for the reference of universities and colleges. It was stressed that the purposes of the QNTEE evaluation would be to encourage universities and colleges to refer to the benchmarking indicators for self-improvement.

There has been increasing awareness of the importance of internal quality assurance arrangements among Chinese universities and colleges after the start of the higher education expansion process. This has been because expansion would mean more competition and quality would be the central part of their competitiveness. In recent years, enormous efforts have been made to maintain or lift the quality of teaching and research. Lots of universities upgraded their faculty members by recruiting more Ph.D. holders. Internal teaching evaluation mechanisms have been established with students playing increasingly important role. In order to increase the productivity of the academic staff, some universities have introduced a performance-related subsidy system.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the demand for institutional autonomy and social accountability of universities in China came with the broader background of China's transition from state planning economy to market-oriented economy started from the 1980s and was reinforced in the context of higher education expansion at the turn of the 21st century. Institutional autonomy would mean more devolution and decentralization of powers and responsibilities to the universities to make them more responsive to the changing needs of the society, rather than to encourage them to remain isolated from the society and keep the so-called self-entertainment culture of their activities. The demand of institutional autonomy is not in contradiction with the demand for social accountability. To some extent, these two demands are inter-related from each other and complement each other. The balanced development of institutional autonomy and social accountability of universities would be essential to guarantee the healthy and smooth development of Chinese higher education system in the future.

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