

The lobbying of Chinese elite universities

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University

(Submitted on 27 November 2015 with minor revisions made in May 2016)

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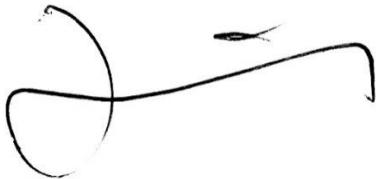
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Date: 10 May 2016

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my principal supervisor Dr Luigi Tomba for his continuous support and immense knowledge. He is one of the best teachers that I have had in my life. His guidance helped me throughout my research and writing of this thesis. I could not have imagined having a better advisor and mentor for my PhD study.

I am deeply grateful and indebted to Professor Jonathan Unger and Professor Glenn Withers, the wonderful members on my academic supervisory panel, for their insightful comments and encouragement, especially their challenging questions which inspired me to widen and deepen my research from various perspectives.

Moreover, my sincere thanks go to Dr Les Rymer who reviewed my entire thesis and provided invaluable comments which have benefited me enormously.

I have to give a special mention to my mentor Mr Michael Gallagher. As a senior policy advisor for the OECD and my former boss at the Group of Eight Universities Australia (Go8), he helped spark my interest in this research field. I cherish the experience and memories we shared in building the Go8's global research university networks during 2008–2014, especially with China.

I would also like to acknowledge the professional editorial assistance from Ms Beth Battrick.

Additionally, I am indebted to my numerous friends and colleagues (including the presidents) from Chinese universities who have openly shared their insights and provided generous support to me during my fieldwork. My sincere thanks also go to the ANU Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW) for all the assistance during my PhD years. I will miss my beautiful office with the stunning view overlooking the green oval and Black Mountain.

Last but not the least, none of this would have been possible without the love and patience of my family and friends. Especially, my heart-felt gratitude goes to my husband Joshua Young, my parents Professor Liang Guowei and Cai Jianrui, as well as my in-laws Michael Young and Judy Young. They have given me enormous love and strength throughout my research and my life in general. I now look forward to sharing much more time with them in France, China and Australia!

Canberra, Australia, October 2015

Abstract

Despite the growing research on policy lobbying in China, little is known about Chinese research universities' perspectives, strategies and interactions with the government in their efforts to influence higher education policies and advance their individual and collective interests. Their lobbying practices have long been hidden from the public view and difficult to research. Yet, the elite Chinese research universities have accumulated capacity to exert influence, and their discreet lobbying of government institutions has in fact become prevalent and is one of the most significant parts of university–government relations.

This study investigates how the leading Chinese research universities interact with the central government to influence policies of crucial importance to their operations. In particular, it explores the strategies and forms of agency the institutions develop to exploit the loopholes of a fragmented central bureaucracy, and identifies the key factors and 'rules of the game' that shape their lobbying behaviour and define their patterns of interaction with the state. It asks how successful they are vis-à-vis the authoritarian state in a tight regulatory environment, and the potential implications of their activism for the current political structure.

My study relies on a unique set of empirical evidence which includes 48 personal interviews with university top leaders and executives from a range of leading research universities, as well as with government officials. An in-depth analysis of these interviews and other previously inaccessible materials yields remarkable findings. It reveals two salient factors framing the university–state interactions: the need and capacity to monitor, navigate and penetrate an opaque central power structure within the state bureaucracy and the regulatory environment of the higher education sector; and the contingencies that create strategic opportunities and/or major crises. When the central power structure and regulatory environment are rigid, taking advantage of or reacting to any contingencies becomes necessary for any effective actions.

'Lobbying authoritarianism' is the result of the hybrid nature of universities in China's political system: they need autonomy to modernise their operations and gain international and domestic prestige while at the same time remaining dependent on the government's ideology, financial control, and political will. Their strategic and contingent activism is unlikely to lead, singlehandedly, to any significant structural changes.

Yet, through lobbying, these institutions have pushed policy boundaries and engineered incremental modifications to the system demonstrating a remarkable capacity to produce specific opportunities and influence individual decisions. Their lobbying strategies may also

produce an enduring impact on policymaking, increasing officials' reliance and acceptance of bottom-up inputs and facilitating a more inclusive and rational approach in the bureaucracy. These gradual steps may altogether lead to a more vibrant education sector, and ultimately, an evolution of the system and a more open society.

This original work advances our understanding about the practices of lobbying authoritarianism and of university behaviour in this field. It also provides new insights and facilitates future research on the major phenomena of the changing role and nature of the central state and of the role and nature of the elite research universities in China.

Table of contents

Contents

List of diagrams	13
Introduction	15
China's changing landscape	17
Changes in state–society relations on policymaking	17
The university sector	18
Chinese universities as policy advocates	24
Aim and significance of the study	31
Research design and methods	32
Structure overview of the thesis	34
Chapter 1—The higher education policymaking arena: opportunities for agency in an authoritarian structure	37
Introduction	37
Defining the powers: the central governing institutions	38
Party-state	39
The Ministry of Education (MoE)	44
The lack of intermediary bodies and advocacy groups	44
Defining national universities: central sponsorship and supervision	46
National universities' affiliation with the central state	48
National universities' dependence on central funding	49
National universities' autonomy	50
National universities and their local governments	51
Defining national priorities: science and education policies in the nation-building strategies	52
'Invigorating the nation through science and education' and 'knowledge economy'	53

‘Prioritising key institutions’ and ‘Project 211’	54
‘Building world-class universities’ and ‘Project 985’	55
‘2011 Scheme’ (Collaborative Innovation Plan)	58
‘Building new-type think tanks’ at research universities	59
Unequal dialogue: formal mechanism for universities to participate in government policymaking.....	60
Top-down channels led by the MoE.....	60
Bottom-up channels initiated and driven by universities	66
Concluding remarks.....	67

Chapter 2—Deepening engagement in policies: universities as social, moral and political actors71

Introduction.....	71
Universities as social actors: pursuing public interests.....	71
Long-term missions	72
Serving the government and society.....	73
Leading the sector	75
Universities as moral actors: values and people	76
University leaders and academics	77
Social networks.....	79
Public activities.....	80
Universities as political actors: feeling the ‘policy zones’	81
‘No-go zone’: unchallengeable principles	83
‘Contention zone’: key constraints and conflicts	89
‘Autonomous zone’: low-risk local affairs	99
Concluding remarks.....	100

Chapter 3—C9: the alignment of interests amongst universities103

Introduction.....	103
Rising stars.....	106
Political patronage.....	109

Consolidation: collective activities and advocacy.....	112
Formal establishment: C9 coalition	117
Group’s operational agreement	118
Public announcement	119
Retreat and decline.....	122
Factors contributing to the decline.....	124
New challenges	129
Concluding remarks	131
Implications of collective lobbying in China.....	134
Chapter 4—Going solo: universities pursuing individual interests	137
Introduction	137
Decoding ‘university lobbying’: practice versus expression	138
Acting alone: the avoidance of collective lobbying	141
Intense competition, self-interested focus and conflicted needs	142
A political and regulatory environment inhibiting collective lobbying.....	145
An alternative strategy: coordinated but separated lobbying activities	148
A multi-player game: identifying lobbying targets within a fragmented, hierarchical and opaque central bureaucracy	149
Fragmentation and rivalry	150
Power hierarchy.....	154
The supreme power of the top leaders	160
Concluding remarks	163
Chapter 5—Lobbying imperfect institutions: human factors, scientific persuasion and policy experimentation.....	167
Introduction	167
Institutionalising the Chinese state	168
Higher education governance: institutionalised arrangements versus informal practices...171	
Institutionalised arrangements.....	172
Informality and human factors	174

Explanations	181
Implications for universities	185
University strategies for the semi-institutionalised system.....	186
Mobilising human factors.....	186
<i>Guanxi</i> building: strengthening ability to mobilise human factors	190
Scientific persuasion.....	195
Local policy experiments and pilot trials	202
Concluding remarks.....	207
The importance of <i>guanxi</i>	208
The impact of university lobbying on the system	210
Chapter 6—Discussion and conclusion: lobbying authoritarianism and the practices of elite universities.....	211
Constraints amid opportunities: where lobbying begins	211
Strategies and flexibility amid rigidity: the practices of university lobbying	213
The rules of the game: key factors shaping lobbying practices	217
Lobbying authoritarianism: limitations, influence and implications.....	221
Bibliography.....	227
List of abbreviations	243
Glossary of Chinese terms	245
Appendices	247
Appendix A—Interviews.....	247
Appendix B—Internal departments of the MoE.....	248
Appendix C—Project 211 universities (112 members).....	250
Appendix D—Project 985 universities (39 members)	252

List of diagrams

Diagram 1.1	Central governance structure	39
Diagram 1.2	The governing and administrative structure for Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs)	47
Diagram 2.1	Governance within a Chinese national university	86

The lobbying of Chinese elite universities

Introduction

Over four decades of economic reforms, education has become central to China's national imaginary and development strategies. Universities, elite national research universities in particular, have been at the forefront of the government's strategy to develop the nation and catch up with the rest of the world. Despite expanded opportunities in a rapidly changing policy, cultural and social environment, universities have continued to operate in confined spaces with regulatory constraints, while facing increasing competition and a proliferation of political and economic actors with interest in education. With a growing consciousness of their own long-term public and scholarly missions, and the ambition to perform both a national and global role, Chinese universities have engaged more actively in government processes to attract resources, seek greater autonomy and cash in on competitive advantage. Despite the increasing importance and policy demand on and from Chinese universities as social, moral and political organisations in the nation, the opaque nature of government–university interaction has so far made it difficult to study their lobbying practice in a systematic way.

My research is based on original interviews with university leaders. Thanks to connections with Chinese universities established through my family and professional career, I have gained extensive and direct access to university leaders and key personnel, which has allowed me to fill the demand for knowledge in this underexplored space.

This thesis aims to investigate how the leading Chinese research universities interact with the central government on the higher education and research policies of crucial importance to their operations. In particular, it explores the strategies put in place under different conditions and the forms of agency they develop to exploit the loopholes of a fragmented central bureaucracy, and identifies the key factors and 'rules of the game' that shape lobbying behaviour, strategies and patterns of interaction with the state. It asks to what extent universities can successfully influence the decisions of the authoritarian state in a tight regulatory environment, and the potential implications of their activism for the current political structure.

It is important to clarify that the focus of the research is not on probing or comparing the lobbying practices between different types of institutions in the vast Chinese tertiary education sector, or on distinguishing Chinese university lobbying from that of other countries which operate in different political systems and regulatory environments. They would require new, separate studies in the future. My main focus here is on the top research universities which have the best access to and the greatest interest in influencing government policy.

As the education policymaking process is a large, complex area, universities are only one side in the multi-player game of policymaking. My perspective will allow us to understand such processes from the vantage point of important policy actors, but numerous other factors may intervene in decision-making processes, many of which remain unclear and non-transparent. Various governmental functional departments, other parts of the higher education sector, and society can interact with each other and exercise their influence on policymaking, either formally or informally. Through a range of examples in the thesis, I present various possible factors contributing to policy decisions in order to demonstrate the extent of universities' influence and effectiveness in such matters.

Although Chinese universities are appendages of government and party organisations, due to their close ties with sponsoring government agencies and their significant financial and regulatory dependence on the state, their motivations and proactive attempts to become involved directly in the education and research policymaking process through their networks and personnel are more similar to the behaviour of lobbyists than to that of a bureaucratic entity working within the state structure. Universities adopt a variety of strategies to interact with a broad spectrum of central actors, act upon their economic interests, seek greater institutional autonomy from the state, have clear perceptions of their roles and missions, and are embedded in society. Universities, hence, should be seen as organisations that operate in a complex environment where an academic role, a bureaucratic role and an economic role interact to define their lobbying behaviour. It makes more sense to view universities as non-state organisations and social actors than as an extension or part of the government's organisational complex, and their actions should be seen as lobbying in the same sense as the term has been applied to other sectors of economy.

This Introduction first outlines the context, motivation, and significance of the study, and then explains the research scope, methods and structure of the thesis.

China's changing landscape

Changes in state–society relations on policymaking

During the country's economic reform, social actors have progressively become, directly or indirectly, more involved in policy debates and yielded increasing influence. This constitutes a departure from the top-down, state-dominated model of previous eras (Harding, 1984; Rosario, 1989). Numerous studies have shown that under the changing socio-economic circumstances of recent years, individual actors and groups outside the traditional arenas of policymaking, such as social elites, media and journalists, individual citizens, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and netizens, have begun to make serious attempts to participate in the setting of particular aspects of the policy agenda and become more involved in government decisions through formal, institutionalised platforms and informal channels (J. Ma & Lin, 2012). Although the regime still lacks transparent and regulated forums for public participation in policymaking, a much greater variety of sources of actors is now capable of influencing the discussion.¹

The role of lobbying, or *youshui* (游说) in Chinese,² has become more commonly recognised and valued by the public and media (Chang, 2009, pp. 23-24; M. Yu, Wang, Fang, Yong, & Zhao, 2003, pp. 24-25; C. Zhang, 2011; Zhenghua Zhou, Liu, & Sun, 2009, pp. 20-22). The rise of a market economy in which the government still yields much financial and regulatory power has spurred lobbying activities across a number of industries. Despite a decrease in the government's direct involvement in the micromanagement of enterprises, the Chinese economy is still heavily regulated and the state still owns the major companies in industries in strategic sectors. Nonetheless, these firms, as well as private and semi-private companies, have expanded efforts to influence public policy to ensure that the bureaucracy's policy positions are in concert with the interests of businesses and industries on important issues (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 101; Kennedy, 2008, p. 3; 2009, p. 198).

¹ Examples from others' scholarly writings include ways in which social organisations shaped national policies for family planning and protection of rural habitats (Saich, 2004, pp. 190-192), or how environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS) challenged and influenced national decisions on hydropower policy (H. Han, 2013; Mertha, 2008), or how individuals used the Internet to undertake collective actions and force policymakers to incorporate societal concerns into the public policy agenda regarding discriminatory policies toward citizens testing positive for the hepatitis B virus (Yue Wang, 2008, pp. 46-48; Y. Zhu, 2010, pp. 159-166).

² Similar to its definition in western countries (UKPAC, 2010; Zetter, 2011, p. 29), the term 'lobbying' (*youshui* 游说) in China broadly refers to activities undertaken to influence officials' views, decisions and actions regarding government regulations and policies (Cheng, Huang, & Wang, 2003, p. 69; Deng & Kennedy, 2010, pp. 101-102; Z. Tian & Gao, 2006, pp. 560-568).

Lobbying attempts and the influence of companies and business associations have been studied over several decades in various industries. In the case of the telecommunication sector, for instance, internet services provider entrepreneurs lobbied the state through face-to-face meetings and collective activities, and successfully pushed for the institutionalisation of government hearings on pricing (K. G. Huang, 2002, pp. 227-228). In the air transport sector, the airlines affiliated with the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC)—the most powerful players in the field—lobbied the policymakers to push the sector towards an oligopoly model, to avoid the path of open competition that was favoured by smaller players (Eaton, 2013, p. 71). Private entrepreneurs sought benefits by integrating into the party-state system (Dickson, 1997, 2010). Liu also described how industry interest groups of the eastern regions attempted to influence policies and sought competitive advantages by paying frequent visits to ministries, making proactive and persistent policy requests, and even ‘crying and begging’ for attention and support (H. Liu, 2006, pp. 53-54).

The pluralisation and proliferation of policy actors in various arenas can reveal much about the changes in state–society relations. For Kennedy, for example, economic reform has made society far more interested in public policy than during the days of the planned economy. Companies, in particular large ones, became interested in politics when the issues under discussion related to their interests. Despite an uneven presence and capacity amongst social actors and the greater participation and access of large players, external influences on the government have increased across all the sectors. Kennedy finds that over the past decade, the policy areas allowing for proactive public lobbying have expanded and the space of clientelism and limited consultation retracted as a consequence (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 175-179).

If the marketisation of China’s economy and the need for a reformed regulatory framework have resulted in growing interest, consciousness, activism and advocacy in the policy process of numerous arenas, have similar developments taken place in the university sector?

The university sector

Over the last few decades, the Chinese higher education sector has undergone a significant transformation. Greater ambition, new economic opportunities, rapidly growing capacity, fierce competition, and a highly restrictive regulatory framework have provided abundant reasons for Chinese national research universities³ to advocate for a greater role in discussing

³ National research universities are publicly funded, research-intensive universities sponsored and supervised by a central government ministry or agency. I will further define ‘leading national research universities’ later in the Introduction. Other types of higher education institutions, such as local public universities that are managed by local authorities, private universities and vocational colleges, are beyond the scope of this research thesis.

higher education policy, both to seek competitive advantages in resources and to gain more autonomy.⁴

Education has traditionally remained under considerable control from the government and is deeply embedded in national politics (S. Liu, 2006, p. 87). In the Maoist period, as party leaders fought over different approaches to national development and shifted their attitude towards education policy, the education system served merely as a passive vehicle and auxiliary tool for realising the party's political objectives and the leaders' interest, rather than as an autonomous institution for the development of knowledge and social change (Tsang, 2000). Since the PRC was established in 1949, radicals and moderates in the Communist Party of China differed fundamentally in their goals and approaches to national development, and consequently on the role of education in national development.

In the reconstruction provided by Tsang (2000, p. 582), party leaders were sharply divided over three enduring education policy dilemmas: 'the economic versus political/ideological functions of education (expertise versus redness), education for efficiency versus education for social equity (stratified education system preparing well-trained meritocrats, leaders and diversified workforce versus anti-elitism education for the masses); and the proper role of intellectuals (enlisting intellectuals and high-skilled personnel in socialist development versus treating them as antagonists and suppressing them)'. During the swings between these positions, 'education was caught in cycles of heart-wrenching dislocations and adjustments' (Tsang, 2000, p. 601), and major educational policies and reversals were undertaken to tackle these enduring dilemmas. As a result, the wildly oscillating and erratic policies severely damaged the education sector and neglected universities' legal status, roles, growth, and academic nature.

Nevertheless, the development trajectory of education took a turn in the late 1970s when China started its reforms and opened up its economy. Chinese leaders formed a lasting consensus about the important role of education in national economic and human capital development (Tsang, 2000). Since the beginning of the 1980s, with the persistent goal of building a stronger nation, the government announced a series of significant national development strategies and funding policies to strengthen the role and function of education and science in China, accompanied by slogans such as 'Invigorating the nation through science and education' (*kejiao xingguo* 科教兴国) and 'Developing a knowledge economy' (*fazhan*

⁴ In this thesis, higher education policy broadly refers to a wide range of macro and micro level policies on how universities are organised, funded, operated and developed in policy areas including finance, personnel, education, science and research. It includes the making process of the code of conduct, institutions, regulations, and guidelines to address higher education-related public issues (X. Chen & Gao, 2008, p. 120).

zhishi jingji 发展知识经济). Chinese Research and Development (R&D) funds increased drastically from 7.4 billion yuan (about USD 1.2 billion) in 1987 to 1,184.66 billion (about USD 190 billion) in 2013 (NBS, MoST, & MoF, 2014). Chinese Education funding in 2012 reached 4% of the GDP at 378.155 billion yuan (USD 60 billion). In 2013, it reached 388.393 billion yuan (USD 62.4 billion), 142 times the 2.732 billion yuan (USD 0.44 billion) of 1999 (MoF, 2013a).

With such enormous investments in national education and research, national research universities have become crucial contributors to the state's objectives and are required to perform a global and national role. The Chinese central government's R&D funding for universities, for example, rose sharply from 5.73 billion yuan (USD 0.92 billion) in 1998 to 85.67 billion yuan (USD 13.77 billion) in 2013. A number of university development programs were established explicitly to fund elite research universities, under such rubrics as 'Building world-class universities' and 'Building new-type think tanks' (*xinxing zhiku* 新型智库) (see Chapter 1). A healthy funding environment strengthened leading research universities' long-term ambitions, accelerated their growth and expanded their influence.⁵

Universities' involvement as expert advisors in developing public policies also increased because of their role as repositories of technical expertise and knowledge, now in high demand by national policymakers (Min & Wen, 2010, pp. 37, 94; *Xinjingbao*, 2011; T. Xu & Zhang, 2011; Zha, 2011a, p. 56).⁶ Employing the 'experts' became a crucial advantage for these universities. A critical endowment of scientific knowledge, intellectual prestige, historical reputation, and proximity to the central bureaucracy contributed to placing these elite players in an expedient and strategic position.

Marketisation and ongoing education reforms have also led to a diversification of interest in education policies (Bao, 2009, p. 20; X. Zhou & Wang, 2006, p. 10). Liberal ideas of competition and efficiency have become an integral part of universities' core organisational philosophy (J. Xu, 2003, p. 15). Yet national research universities lack financial alternatives and remain

⁵ According to the 2007 statistics published by the Chinese Ministry of Education, for instance, among over 2,300 higher education institutions in China, the first nine universities which received concentrated funding from project '985' (see Chapter 1) accounted for 30.6% of total national key programs/disciplines, 43.6% of total university-based key research laboratories, and nearly 30% total university-based national engineering research centres. They had a significant level of technology commercialisation and patent applications (Jinchun Li, 2007), and they were also ranked highly for China's national Science and Technology (S&T) awards, education expenditure, and research incomes (Jie Zhang, 2012). Collectively, the nine accounted for about 10% of China's R&D expenditures and generate more than 20% of the nation's output of journal articles as in 2009 (Maslen, 2013).

⁶ One notable example is Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2014 strategy on 'developing think tanks' aimed at getting the best possible advice for technocratic policymaking from academic and professional experts (see Chapter 1).

dependent on access to state funding. In the face of new economic opportunities, they thus compete fiercely for the distribution of government resources and try to influence policies that affect their capacity to tap the market (for example, in terms of student recruitment). Consequently, rivalries and interest conflicts amongst universities have increased sharply in recent decades (S. He, 2009, p. 8; Song & Liao, 2004, pp. 26, 28-29).

Opportunities also remain framed by significant regulatory constraints that universities feel threaten academic life and their perceived long-term missions (see Chapter 2). Autonomy and academic freedom are now understood as intrinsic values of a modern university, and a precondition for a university to fulfil its role and responsibilities toward society (Thorens, 2006; Junzong Zhang, 2004) and to compete internationally. However, Chinese universities are still strictly controlled by the state and are not autonomous entities (Jianhua Hu, 2002; H. Jiang, Lin, & Li, 2005; S. Liu, 2006).⁷

Structurally, universities operate under the leadership and supervision of the government, and develop within the regulatory boundaries defined by the education authority. To some extent, universities are embedded in the national central bureaucracy, and appear as an extension of government or as quasi-government agencies. Education policymaking mechanics have been top-down and highly controlled processes.⁸ Areas like political education, sensitive areas of research, and the appointment of the university executives by the central government suggest that the state maintains considerable control over tertiary education (Pan, 2007; R. Yang, Vidovich, & Currie, 2007). Several university personnel whom I interviewed referred to the education sector as ‘the last, enduring fort of the planned economy’ (*jihua jingji zuihou yige baolei* 计划经济最后一个堡垒). The government also imposes a utilitarian and instrumentalist ideology, defines the roles, priorities and tasks of universities based on national strategies, and guides university activities through the structure and goals of its funding programs. As education is regarded as important to economic growth, the utilitarian

⁷ Despite the decentralisation and restructure of the higher education sector in the late 1990s, as well as the Higher Education Law that took effect on 1 January 1999, the state still intervenes in, controls and dominates many areas of the sector where the law says universities should enjoy autonomy and independence (Geng, 2010; Jianhua Hu, 2002; B. Yang, 2011). The rules of Higher Education Law, for instance, define the boundaries of university autonomy and restrict universities’ operational activities and behaviours but do not regulate or limit the government’s interventions into universities’ business (Jupeng Yang & Su, 2012).

⁸ There seems to be a pervasive view and common discourse amongst scholars that the education policymaking mechanics of the regime have been top-down, unpredictable, and highly controlled processes. Research and empirical studies on the process for forming important educational decisions are limited. Key policy decisions still heavily rely on the view and directives of the state leadership (H. Kang, 2006, pp. 11, 13; X. Lu, 2008, p. 39; Tsang, 2000; Q. Wang, 2014, pp. 150-151).

needs of national economic development clearly trump the needs of universities or the idea of education for education's sake (Tsang, 2000; Y. Wan, 2006, pp. 22-23; Q. Wang, 2014, pp. 146, 150-151).⁹ As a result, universities' political, social and economic functions for nation building are over-emphasised, yet their own academic nature, scholarly character and mission are neglected and restrained in service of political or economic interests (T. Jiang, 2012, p. 69).

With their ambition on a global stage and inherent needs for scholarly autonomy, it becomes increasingly vital for universities to free themselves from the shackles of state control (Ren, 2008, p. 3) by voicing their needs and increasing their influence, or by collaborating with peer institutions to protect themselves from detrimental government interference (H. Jiang et al., 2005, p. 94; Y. Wang, 2014, pp. 69-70; J. Xu, 2012, pp. 23-24).

As John Douglass suggests, Chinese universities have been largely 'followers' on a global playing field, constrained and shaped by a state-driven political culture. Yet there are indications that this may change. The globalisation of higher education and increased international collaborations are creating a consensus among Chinese university leaders and faculty that excessive government control has become a hindrance and that increased institutional independence will be necessary to fully mature and develop world-class universities (Douglass, 2012, pp. 642,664-645). The C9, a university group composed of the nine leading Chinese national research universities, has become part of the global network that discusses how to tackle the challenges facing research universities around the world (Rhoads & Shi, 2014, p. 179).¹⁰

The success of universities still largely depends on their capacity to influence the state, to obtain competitive advantages and reduce regulatory constraints.¹¹ So is a noticeable increase in universities' involvement in policymaking only a strategic reaction to new constraints, or is it a sign of a more structural transformation?

⁹ Economic growth played a central role in the policymaking of the Chinese government in the 1990s. For instance, Premier Li Lanqing offered an official explanation as to why the government decided to expand higher education in 1999. The top reason he provided was the national economy (Lanqing Li, 2003).

¹⁰ The C9, Consortium of China Nine Research Universities, started to operate in 2003 as an informal network, and was formally established in October 2008 as China's equivalent to the US Ivy League. In Chinese society, the group is also often called as 'the coalition of nine schools' (*jiuxiao lianmeng* 九校联盟). Its membership includes Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Nanjing University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Zhejiang University, Harbin Institute of Technology, University of Science and Technology China, and Xi'an Jiaotong University. I provide more details about C9 in Chapter 3.

¹¹ For example, in the sense of international recognition and reputation, the success and excellence of universities are still measured by the quality of their academic outputs. Universities depend on government policies and resources to support and strengthen their academic activities and performance.

To investigate this question, this study places its emphasis on the lobbying behaviour of a range of leading Chinese national research universities—arguably some of the most active players in the sector—and its political implications and consequences. For the purpose of this study, I broadly define ‘elite’ or ‘leading research universities’ as the first national research institutions which the Chinese government has selected to receive special funding under a national elite university program named ‘Project 985’ (MoE, 2011a). These leading universities have been central to the government’s efforts to develop tertiary education ever since they were drafted into Project 985 in 1998–1999. They also are some of the most prestigious and research-intensive universities in the country.

These leaders of the higher education sector possess a number of characteristics that make them the ideal subjects for this research.

First, their early inclusion in Project 985 makes them the officially recognised elite institutions in China and suggests that they hold a central role in the government’s objective of national development. Although this elite 985 program has been expanded and transformed several times and now includes 39 universities (Xinhuanet, 2011), the early entrants in the program still lead the higher education sector in various metrics including size, share of central funding, research facilities, quality of students (highest entrance scores), internationalisation, academic performance, research revenues, research output and commercialisation (Jinchun Li, 2007, p. 49; M. Wan, 2014).

Second, these institutions all carry the label of ‘national university’, are sponsored, supervised and funded by various central agencies, and have important connections and proximity to the state. With the state’s substantial investments and expectation for them to perform a national and global role, these universities have developed significantly in terms of ambition, academic prestige and public influence, which may provide them with political leverage and advantages.

Third, they are all located in provincial capital cities, geographically distributed across China’s north, south, east and west. They represent various economic, historical, and regional circumstances and diverse research strengths.

Fourth, as a consequence of the previous points, they have stronger motivations and visions to engage government policies. They tend to be more sensitive to, and affected by, policy constraints and the lack of autonomy, and are highly competitive and demanding about government funding and resources. They are also more capable of interacting with different organs of the state to address their concerns and support their interests. Together with their leverage, strengths and connections, they are also more likely to produce policy input and influence, either individually or collaboratively. Therefore they provide a good opportunity to observe university–government interactions on a number of different levels.

Fifth, these elite universities have been involved in a university lobby network called 'C9' since 2003. By dint of their considerable experience over a decade, they have articulated their views more confidently with regard to the operations and challenges of a lobby group, peer competition and conflicts, and the collective and individual lobbying strategies they have employed (see Chapter 3). Both individually and through the activities of the C9, they have also been involved in significant international collaborations.

Chinese universities as policy advocates

In their interactions with the government, the research universities play two concurrent, distinct roles in the national policy process, namely as policy advisor (informing policy) and policy advocate (influencing policy).

Universities and individuals within a university are commonly involved in government-led policy consultations as authoritative expert advisors on broad policies across numerous fields, not only on education and research policies. This role is often defined and designated by the state and is expected to be disinterested, neutral and objective, providing intellectual legitimacy and services to assist the government's decision-making through formal or informal channels.

As mentioned earlier, the state is increasingly seeking and relying on experts' advice for more 'rational' policymaking. Zhang suggests that such a 'scientific' policymaking approach by the government has enabled university policy experts to gain some 'power', become a part of the education policymaking process, implant their views and provide inputs (Guobing Zhang, 2010, p. 185). There is currently an increasing recognition of the intellectual authority and social capital of academic experts, scholars and research centres (think tanks) in shaping various government public policies directly and indirectly (Min & Wen, 2010, pp. 37, 94; Xinjingbao, 2011; T. Xu & Zhang, 2011; Zha, 2011a, p. 56; X. Zhu, 2008, pp. 69-93; 2009).¹² This broad knowledge and expertise in a wide range of policy areas often provide them with significant clout to also influence education policies that are close to and affect their interests.

¹² Examples also include telecommunications policies (K. G. Huang, 2002, pp. 258-259), and social, environmental and international policies (Sharma, 2014; Tang, 2014). A common theme of these episodes is the fact that the state is increasingly aware that stronger critical thinking is needed to support the leadership as it faces complex social, economic and environmental challenges. Nevertheless, their provision of advice and their influence are still mostly within the confines of the system (Sharma, 2014), and are often indirect, gradual, or even frail, in front of government power and market forces in policymaking (Zha, 2011a, p. 56).

As policy advocates, universities and individuals within a university have vested interests and subjective positions, generally involving conflicts of interest. They pursue specific goals, often taking a proactive and bottom-up approach in influencing government policies and decisions.

Here I should point out that in the context of institutional lobbying in China, each university can be largely seen as a unified and monolithic entity with collective institutional interests, coherent political strategies and advocacy approach. Within the hierarchical organisational system of an institution, the university senior management controls its internal processes, and guides its policy advocacy and government affairs. Members in the senior management, including president, party secretary and vice presidents, are not only active lobbyists themselves representing the university's collective interests, but also advise and authorise key personnel of various administrative departments to directly negotiate with the officialdom in specific policy areas. Examples include directors of science and technology on research grant policies, heads of student recruitment on national admissions policies, and deans of graduate studies on postgraduate admissions and funding policies. There are unavoidably internal differences within an institution, such as divergent opinions and behaviours of individuals. However, they usually produce limited impact on the overall political strategies and operations of the organisation, hence are largely negligible in this context.

As I will illustrate later in the thesis, the boundaries between research universities' advisor and advocate roles can become unclear and overlap in practice, especially for higher education and research policies which impact on their institutional interests. Such a 'double role' is partially the result of universities being repositories of knowledge, which makes their position different from other lobbying actors in other industries, and is also partially due to the lack of legitimate channels and formal institutions for them to participate in the government process as policy advocates and lobbyists (see Chapter 1).

Universities' advisor role complements their advocate role: acting as an advisor helps enhance a university's credibility, capacity, understanding of the internal workings of the system, and connections with officials, as well as helping to demonstrate the importance of universities in meeting the objectives of the government. All of these enable universities to operate more effectively as policy advocates.

This growing policy advisory role and 'expert' credentials also create more opportunities and leverage for universities to become involved in the government and promote their agenda and policy advocacy to officials. This often results in direct lobbying of central ministries and the National People's Congress to attract more funding to support universities (Guobing Zhang, 2010, p. 55). However, the prevalent assumption that such an advocacy role is limited and that the state holds all the power (Zhongjing Huang, 2010; H. Kang, 2006; X. Lu, 2008; Y. Wang,

2014),¹³ as well as the difficulties for researchers to collect qualitative data on university lobbying due to the covert nature of university–government interaction (S. He, 2009, p. 8; Guobing Zhang, 2010, pp. 115-116) has limited in-depth research to support it.¹⁴

The Chinese government seeks policy advisors but feels threatened by policy advocates. ‘Higher education lobbying’ is common but not regulated or legitimised (S. He, 2009, p. 8). Significant anecdotal evidence shows that leaders and faculty from universities have acted as policy advocates and made efforts to influence the government and public opinion on specific education policies to pursue special or collective interests.¹⁵ I have witnessed firsthand such interactions in my personal and professional experience over the years. As the thesis will later

¹³ Many Chinese scholars describe Chinese universities as playing a rather ‘limited’, ‘weak’, ‘indirect’ and ‘submissive’ role in policymaking process due to the regulatory dominance of the state (H. Kang, 2006, pp. 12-13; J. Lin, 2004, p. 23; X. Lu, 2008, pp. 38-40; Y. Wang, 2014, p. 70). Wang, for instance, suggests that Chinese universities have played a passive role of compliance, and they have not explored or developed their self-consciousness, proactivity and ability to take initiatives (Y. Wang, 2014, p. 70). Lu argues that government leaders developed the new ideas of key national policies for building high-level universities, and universities played a minimal role in these policies (X. Lu, 2008, pp. 39-40). Such a presumption overlooks the advocacy role played by universities and their policy influence.

¹⁴ My interviewees generally agree that it is challenging for researchers to study university–government interaction in China because their lobbying activities are often surreptitious and competitive in nature. Shu He, for instance, points out that many Chinese universities set up Beijing offices to lobby the government, but the terms ‘lobbyists’, ‘lobbying’ or ‘higher education lobbying’ are not legitimised and rarely used (S. He, 2009, p. 8). Zhang suggests that the covert nature of the interactions between university leaders and government officials, and between government officials, especially at the elite level, makes it difficult to study how these informal elements have shaped policies (Guobing Zhang, 2010, pp. 115-116, 188).

¹⁵ In December 1979, a number of top university leaders from Shanghai sent a joint letter to party-led newspaper *People’s Daily* in Beijing, publically appealing for greater autonomy for their universities (Xiao, 1979). This is the first official record of universities publically acting as policy advocates. In 1986, Chinese engineers Wang Ganchang, Wang Daheng, Yang Jiayi, and Chen Fangyun lobbied the government on funding support for high-tech research, which received endorsement by Deng Xiaoping and soon led to a significant national research funding policy (MoST, 2010b). In May 1983, then Chancellors of Nanjing University, Zhejiang University and others penned a handwritten letter to Deng Xiaoping and the State Council, suggesting a national policy for investing in a small number of elite national universities and key academic disciplines. This proposal soon received support from the leadership, marking the beginning of a series of national policies to fund key universities (MoE, 1983; *People’s Daily*, 1983). In 1998, China’s elite institutions Peking University and Tsinghua University jointly lobbied the government on a new university funding project named ‘985’, which was implemented in 1999 and changed the development trajectory of Chinese higher education (Min & Wen, 2010; Guobing Zhang, 2010). In more recent years, research universities made several attempts to establish associations to represent their interest and provide policy input, such as the ‘Association of Chinese research universities’ (ACRU) (Juan Hu, Li, & Wang, 2007; Ji, 2008), which was initiated in 2007 but later suspended, and the Consortium of China Nine Research Universities (C9) (Zhong Zhou, 2010), which was established in 2008 and still operates to date.

show, university executives admitted to me that lobbying is a highly common occurrence and has been beneficial to them when seeking competitive advantages on autonomy, funding resources and policy support. In the words of one interviewee, it has become ‘a most significant part of university–government interactions’.

Some Chinese authors have captured specific episodes of universities’ involvement in government processes as proactive advocates. Guobing Zhang (2010, pp. 185-190, 183), for instance, finds that there was ‘an alliance of advocacy actors’ (*zhichi lianmeng* 支持联盟) behind each successful key national university funding project that favoured elite institutions.¹⁶ The alliance included leading national universities, officials from the Ministry of Education (MoE) and media.

In Zhang’s story, the universities evidently acted as policy lobbyists: they played an active role, through both formal and informal means,¹⁷ in promoting their policy ideas and rationale to the top national leaders (the ultimate decision-makers) and in attracting central financial support from other key ministries such as the Ministry of Finance. Besides, many other institutions that were not selected by the state vigorously petitioned the MoE and their central sponsoring ministries trying to get themselves into these elite programs and gain a share of the special funding. As a consequence of this pressure, these programs were later expanded to include more recipients and the central funding was diluted to accommodate such expansion (Guobing Zhang, 2010, pp. 3, 171-180). This recurring pattern reveals how the active role and influence of universities in advancing their self-interests behind the scenes has shaped the trajectory of these policies.

Zhang suggests that the shared vision and aligned interest between elite universities and the education bureaucracies was crucial to the successful establishment and development of these national programs, and that universities are not permitted to contest the policy views and decisions of their central supervisory institutions but can provide policy advice and support to them (Guobing Zhang, 2010, p. 190). His work, however, does not consider the numerous cases when the interests and priorities of universities and government clash, and that can provide a better insight into the actions and capacity of universities to change the course of a policy or a regulatory principle.

¹⁶ These elite programs include the 1985 policy to boost central support for seven key institutions, and Project 211 and Project 985 which targeted funding at a small number of best universities.

¹⁷ They included face-to-face, direct contact (p. 84), joint actions (p. 65), personal connections with senior officials (p. 84), alumni networks (pp. 65, 82), and raising proposals at National People’s Congress (p. 55) and workshops (p. 55) (Guobing Zhang, 2010).

Another author, Suyan Pan, studied how Tsinghua University (Tsinghua) successfully influenced the government and gained relative freedom and greater decision-making power. In the process, close personal relations between Tsinghua's leadership and state officials played a key role. Pan suggests that, 'to gain more autonomy than the state initially granted, the university cannot simply fight with the government, but needs to adopt strategies to play safely' (Pan, 2007, p. 140). Pan's conclusion illuminates an important aspect, but due to the uniqueness of Tsinghua's political influence and extent of personal linkages, his study may have limited overall validity for the general practices of university lobbying.

Zhong Zhou's work (2010) chronicles the formation of the C9 as the result of a joint political approach to influence the university funding policies of Project 985, but provides limited empirical evidence or details of their interactions.

Although each study addresses certain issues of interest, questions remain. In particular, beyond the isolated anecdotal evidence, no systematic attempt at an analysis of individual and collective lobbying behaviour in the university sector has been made. The set of unwritten 'rules of the game' or principles that shape university lobbying behaviour is yet to be explored.

Scholars have studied how such interactions happen in other sectors.¹⁸ Through the use of comparative case studies, Kennedy finds that economic circumstances (condition of the sector and the size of a firm)¹⁹ and political context (political institutions and official norms)²⁰ are important factors that shape business-government interaction across economic sectors (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 163-174). He and Tian also observe that Chinese private enterprises' strategies and behaviour are affected by political environmental factors (e.g., power conflicts between central and local institutions) and organisational factors (e.g., a firm's size and its

¹⁸ Some NGOs and international entities lobby the government by employing tactics such as public campaign, legal persuasion, petition letters to the ministry and forming a loose collective network (H. Han, 2013, pp. 327-331). In economic industries, firms of various ownership and industries typically lobby through both formal institutions and informal practices, with information, public relations, and trust-building as underlying motivational mechanisms a company uses to persuade an official to accept their position. They routinely provide information in oral and written forms, host face-to-face, policy-related meetings with policymakers, and use public media in support of their policy goals. They also use trade associations for policy influencing (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 114; K. G. Huang, 2002, pp. 174-177; Kennedy & Deng, 2012, p. 155).

¹⁹ Here, economic factors include the level of economic competition and market concentration, and the dominance of SOEs or smaller firms in the sector, and firms' own size. For example, large, elite companies are particularly proactive, influential and effective with officials in the policy process on Chinese public policy, regardless of ownership or nationality, and more active over the range of lobbying tactics (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 41).

²⁰ Political context includes the political system's historical practice of compartmentalising information and semi-transparent process, unproductive formal institutions for aggregation of industry interests, the importance of direct political ties, and state control over associations (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 163-164).

senior executives' political ranks and personal ties with the government) (Y. He & Tian, 2007, p. 17).

For Kennedy, businesses largely interact directly with the state on policy, with limited reliance on trade associations, and avoid challenging the government's authority. Instead, deference to the state, and pursuit of a win-win position and mutually beneficial outcome remain the common strategies (Kennedy, 2008, p. 164). This is partially the result of the political control and restrictions over social groups and advocacy organisations (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 163, 171; Unger & Chan, 2008, pp. 66-68) and the lack of legitimacy of lobbying activity in China (Cheng, 2006, pp. 44,47-48; Cheng et al., 2003, p. 63; Kennedy, 2009, pp. 213-214), as well as partially because some business actors, especially large firms, have direct ties with the state (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 163-167).

Different types of organisations lobby differently: for-profit actors (e.g., corporations or trade associations) typically choose lobbying techniques that differ from those of public interest groups²¹ and non-profit sectors (e.g., civil environmental groups). The nature of the policy issues influences a group's lobbying strategy (Cook, 1998, pp. 139-140; Gais & Walker, 1991, pp. 117-119; Schlozman & Tierney, 1986, p. 431).²²

Unlike either enterprises (marketing private goods) or government institutions (providing public goods) (R. Zhang, 2011, pp. 104-105), universities are quasi-public organisations (providing quasi-public goods) with concentrated knowledge discovery and exploration, unique socio-economic attributes and functions, peculiar internal institutional structures, as well as independent and academic organisational values and cultures. This distinctive nature of universities guides their operation and behaviour and determines how they relate to and interact with the government and society (Zijie Huang & Cheng, 2010, pp. 190-192; Junzong Zhang, 2004, pp. 8-9). Higher education institutions are also particularly sensitive and reactive to any changes to the institutional environment where they operate (J. Lin, 2004, p. 23). Hence, when it comes to lobbying, universities have their own motivation, preferences and logic of actions, and extent of political influence.

²¹ Public interest groups refers to those whose primary purpose is to pursue collective goods that will not selectively and materially reward their members (Berry, 1977, p. 10).

²² In the US, for instance, higher education associations are occupationally based non-profit associations and generally fall into the category of non-profit sector (Cook, 1998, p. 139). Cook, Gais and Walker suggest that such occupationally based non-profit associations are organised around an economic interest or livelihood and therefore appear to have more self-interest than citizen groups when lobbying, and they usually lobby much the same way that citizen groups do (Cook, 1998, pp. 139-140; Gais & Walker, 1991, pp. 117-119).

More importantly, their behaviour and the discourses they promote reveal much about the nature and potential implications of their interactions with the political system. When analysing business lobbying behaviours, Kennedy suggests that this growth in business' policy influence has ambiguous implications for democratisation in the political future of China (Kennedy, 2008, p. 179). Some businesses believe democratisation is in their best interests, but 'those with relatively significant influence under the current political circumstances may not see a need for much further modification' (Kennedy, 2008, p. 180).

Some others also argue that despite the pluralisation of the political process and the recent rise of various non-state entities, these are not likely to exert independent policy influence or challenge the regime. In order to achieve their own goals, many non-traditional contributors to policymaking, such as NGOs, media and individual activists, have successfully entered the political process and shaped policy decisions by adopting the strategies necessary to work within the constraints of the 'Fragmented Authoritarianism' (FA) framework (Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992, pp. 2-24; Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988)²³ and by exploiting the fissures within the state and building alliances with like-minded officials without inviting suspicion or repression from the state (Mertha, 2008, pp. 151, 157-158; Zheng, 2010, pp. 147-148).

In comparison, universities are potentially different. They host significant expertise and employ the intellectual elites of the country, but still face substantial constraints to their potential advocacy because of their organic position in the public administration, their social role, and their financial and regulatory dependence on the state. Does this place them in a position that is more or less likely to affect the 'rules of the game', and to produce a challenge to the existing practices of government that bear certain impact?

As Qiang Zha suggests, as a critical source of regime legitimacy for the modern state and its political authority, the rising Chinese universities may be in an unprecedented position to negotiate university autonomy and academic freedom, which, in turn, should serve as the catalyst for a more open society (Zha, 2011b). They are not only agents of social change but also 'the canary in the gold mine—the benchmark to gauge the nation's progress toward a more open ... society' (Douglass, 2012, p. 665).

²³ Fragmented authoritarianism or FA refers to a model for understanding the policy process in the Chinese polity, including the structural distribution of resources and authority; and processes of decision-making and policy implementation. The FA model argues that authority below the very peak of the Chinese political system is fragmented and disjointed. The fragmentation is structurally based and has been enhanced by reform policies regarding procedures. The fragmentation, moreover, grew increasingly pronounced under the reforms beginning in the late 1970s (Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992, p. 8; Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988).

Aim and significance of the study

My study relies on a new and previously unavailable set of empirical evidence to understand the significance of universities' actions for the broader context of Chinese politics. Empirically, this study investigates the strategies of universities towards central government bureaucracies on a broad range of education and research policies that relate to universities' interests. It aims to advance our understanding of both the fragmentation of the central bureaucracy and the universities' ability to exploit it to advance their interests and increase their influence.

In particular, I intend to reassess earlier scholarly views that the Chinese system is becoming more institutionalised and the importance of *guanxi* (关系) has changed in government-business relations (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 124; Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002; Guthrie, 1998, 1999; Kennedy, 2008, p. 109; 2009, p. 207; USCBC, 2008), at least in so far as the higher education sector is concerned.²⁴ This study continues a line of enquiry that tests the level of institutionalisation of the Chinese socialist state and its policymaking mechanisms, and clarifies the role of informal practices in the education policy arena.

Conceptually, my research identifies and articulates what factors and principles guide and define universities' lobbying behaviour and strategies, to what extent they can successfully influence the decisions of the authoritarian state within the confined space created by regulations and dependency, and what the limitations of such influence are. To achieve this goal and understand the boundaries of this arena of interaction, I focus on four areas: universities' perception of their roles, missions and entitlements; understanding of the regulatory and bureaucratic system and strategies to manipulate it; constraints to universities' collective action; and tactics to influence the government.

By analysing universities' discourses and how they perceive themselves and the bureaucracy, and by examining their contention, goals and motivations, what they actually do (interactions,

²⁴ Various studies on economic policymaking have suggested that the system is more institutionalised, and the importance of *guanxi* has changed in direct business-government interactions (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 124; Gold et al., 2002; Guthrie, 1998, 1999; Kennedy, 2008, p. 109; 2009, p. 207; USCBC, 2008). According to Kennedy and Deng (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 124; Kennedy, 2009, p. 207), for instance, at the national level, where laws go through a complex evaluation process by many offices, *guanxi* serves more to help companies gain face time with officials than guarantee a decision will go in their favour; businesses do not depend primarily on *guanxi* to achieve their aims. Instead, companies and associations need to rely more on shaping the substantive views of officials: they attempt to influence policy by providing information and strengthening their public standing. Hiring former officials is common among companies and associations, but such staffers are more valued for their knowledge of the inner workings of the political system than their relationships with specific individuals in office (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 124; Kennedy, 2009, p. 207).

behaviour, actions and practices), and how they interpret what they have done, I intend to assess the potential implications of their activism—How should we understand the universities’ peculiar form of claims and tactics of interaction with the state? Have universities developed a consciousness such that their lobbying of the state is based on their rightful position in a modern society? Or is their action still mainly driven by the set of bureaucratic rules and state-defined roles that form their relationship with the state? Is their activism strategic and contingent, or can it potentially lead to long-term, structural change to the current political system?

Research design and methods

I used a qualitative research method. As Creswell suggests, one important reason for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory; not much has been written about the topic, and the researcher seeks to listen to informants and to build a picture based on their ideas (Creswell, 1998, p. 21). As explained earlier, this topic remains largely underexplored and there is a need for baseline research. My study relies on substantial new firsthand information from a large number of semi-structured in-depth interviews with authoritative and often behind-the-scenes players, as well as firsthand observation of lobbying activities and a comprehensive survey of the existing Chinese-language studies and other relevant documents.

Importantly, my direct access to information sources has given me a unique advantage. Researchers, even those working within a Chinese university, may at times find this topic challenging due to potential conflicts of interest, while foreign researchers may lack access to the core players. I have established, over many years, close connections with leading Chinese universities, including presidents, party secretaries, vice presidents and other key personnel in major policy areas/departments. These university leaders have rich experience in dealing with the government, and are familiar with the government’s operations. Many of them have served in the government before and are expected to take senior official posts later. My interviewees have shared with me their experiences, personal insights and back stories. In addition, I have participated in some of their formal and informal meetings, including some joint meetings with government officials, which provided me with useful insights on their interactions.

In 2013, during my fieldwork to China, I visited nine national research universities in Hangzhou, Nanjing, Beijing, Shanghai, Hefei, Harbin, and Xi’an. I selected a broad range of participants from these major research universities, including some high-profile figures in the sector based on their roles, policy expertise, professional experiences, strategic visions, and direct contacts with the government officialdom and other peer universities. Besides numerous university

leaders and personnel with professional roles (executives, directors and deans), I also interviewed a number of academics and government officials.²⁵

During personal interviews (conducted in Chinese), I made it clear to interviewees that my interest was in the university–government interaction on policies and university lobbying practices.²⁶ Interviews tended to begin with broad generalisations about the lobbying process, but participants would invariably end up providing examples and explanations of the lobbying process and their interactions with the government (see Appendix A–Interviews).

During 2013–2015, I also participated in a range of policy-related meetings and activities which universities and government officials attended. Those events were valuable opportunities for me to gain firsthand insights into university–government and university–university interactions, both formally and behind the scenes, and enabled me to capture some important elements of their direct interactions and behaviour, subtle changes and nuance in attitudes, tones and expressions, which are important indicators of their relationships but cannot be recorded and traced in meeting documents and minutes.

I carefully organised and analysed my interview transcripts and research notes to extract the key issues, examples and findings. I selected some interviewees' direct quotations and translated them from Chinese into English. According to the National Ethics Protocol in Human Research, the names of individuals and institutions I interviewed should remain anonymous. The details and identifying features of the participants and institutions in the interviews are not disclosed in any unpublished or published material resulting from this study. This anonymity not only protected their identity but also encouraged frank, open discussions.

In this thesis, I cite my interviewees using general terms such as 'interviewee' and 'university executive'. I also use random letters to refer to universities (in quotations and examples), and the same letter can refer to different universities.

I also read numerous documents and articles collected through a number of sources:

²⁵ My interviewees include: senior university executives (party secretaries, university presidents, vice presidents, and provosts); key personnel (directors for policy and planning, directors of party and government relations office (*dangzhengban* 党政办), directors of student admissions, directors of teaching affairs, deans of undergraduate studies, international directors, directors of president's office, and deans of graduate studies); scholars and researchers on education policy and government administration; and former and present government officials from various central organs.

²⁶ My interview questions included their perceptions on universities' role and autonomy, university–government relations, current education policy issues, the political regime and government processes, their firsthand experiences and strategies as an individual lobbyist or part of a collective lobby group, as well as their self-reflection and evaluation about their influence and outcomes (see more information in Appendix A).

- official government documents on policies and statistics, including the MoE, Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST), and Ministry of Finance (MoF);
- government officials' speeches, including by national leaders and members of the State Council;
- academic research papers, journals and books, in both English and Chinese languages;
- newspapers, magazines and media reports, including *People's Daily* and *University World News*;
- websites of government agencies, Chinese universities and higher education associations;
- publications of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), including the *OECD Tertiary Review of China* published in 2009; and
- news and minutes of university meetings, provided by universities and interviewees or organised by myself.

In addition, I include numerous examples of university lobbying practices as empirical evidence, which are selected according to their relevance, representativeness and significance. In particular, I investigated the elite university coalition of C9 (Chapter 3). I chose this case because the C9 is the first and most significant example of a lobby group in the higher education sector under the special Chinese political context that emerged in 2003. It is a model and first-of-its-kind experiment of collective lobbying by Chinese universities. The distinct characteristics, past behavioural patterns, and lobbying experience of the C9 group have shed light on how collective lobbying works in the system and its limitations.

Structure overview of the thesis

In order to explore the key issues and guide the enquiry in logical way, my thesis is divided into three parts and six chapters.

Part 1 (Chapters 1 and 2) situates the study. In *Chapter 1—The higher education policymaking arena: opportunities for agency in an authoritarian structure*, I investigate the current formal governance and policymaking framework for the university sector in an authoritarian structure, establish the formal position and roles of universities in the government's nation-building strategies, and explore the formal mechanisms through which universities can participate in education policymaking. This chapter provides an overview of the political, policy and regulatory context within which Chinese universities operate.

In *Chapter 2—Deepening engagement in policies: universities as social, moral and political actors*, I investigate how elite national research universities perceive their roles, missions, rights and influence, how they view the key constraints in the policy arena which hinder the

fulfilment of their roles; as well as how they perceive their capacity to negotiate different entitlements and influence policies. Their understanding of these issues is likely to determine the objectives, strategies and priorities in their policy interactions with the government.

Part 2 (Chapters 3–5) investigates the practices of university lobbying, including occurrences when universities decide to act individually or in a coordinated fashion vis-à-vis various state actors.

Chapter 3—C9: the alignment of interests amongst universities deals with situations where universities' interests are aligned and therefore collective lobbying emerges. I discuss this interest alignment by focusing on the C9. This sheds light on how collective lobbying works in the university sector and on limitations it has faced in the Chinese political context that eventually led to its weakening.

In contrast to the collective group of C9, the general practice of university lobbying is individual and self-focused in nature. *Chapter 4—Going solo: universities pursuing individual interests* presents the prevalent practices of universities lobbying individually (sometimes with coordination but not in a collective organisation). This chapter first outlines some general characteristics of university lobbying practices, including common perceptions, language, frequency, organisational form of agency, and targets for lobbying. I then provide examples of how universities identify and interact with their major lobbying targets (various state actors) within the fragmented, hierarchical and opaque central bureaucracy to seek opportunities to exert their influence.

Chapter 5—Lobbying imperfect institutions: human factors, scientific persuasion and policy experiments examines the most significant aspects of the universities' toolkit when lobbying government officials in various scenarios. In the university sector, informal and personal factors prevail in the higher education regulatory environment due to a range of political, institutional and economic factors. A major component in the capacity of universities to adapt to this complex and semi-institutionalised bureaucracy is their use of three specific forms of social and cultural capital: human factors (e.g. relationships), rational persuasion through knowledge and analysis, and involvement in policy innovation and experimentation. Chapter 5 investigates these three aspects.

Part 3 (Chapter 6): *Chapter 6—Discussion and Conclusion* presents a conceptual evaluation. I first summarise the characteristics of lobbying practices and discuss the key factors that shape universities' decisions and behaviour. This is then discussed within the overarching framework of Chinese contentious politics and state–society interactions, and I reflect and elaborate on the political nature and potential implications of university actors and their activism.

Chapter 1—The higher education policymaking arena: opportunities for agency in an authoritarian structure

Introduction

To understand why and how Chinese national research universities interact with the state on policies, one needs to first investigate the unique political, policy and regulatory context in which they operate. In this introductory chapter, I draw on the literature, government documents and personal interviews. My goal is to outline the current formal governance and policymaking framework for the university sector, establish the formal position and roles of universities in the government's national development strategies, and then focus on exploring the formal channels through which universities can participate in higher education policymaking.²⁷ Some questions will be examined, including: what roles do the Communist Party of China (CPC) leaders and various government organs play in higher education? How are universities being understood, governed, sponsored and funded by the state? What are their functional alignment, funding dependence and administrative affiliation with the central state? What formal mechanisms are there for universities to participate in the government processes and what formal policy roles do they play?

In China, education is deeply embedded in national politics, and has received considerable control and intervention from the government (S. Liu, 2006, p. 87). In the Maoist period, different Chinese Party leaders used education to serve their political interests and national development objectives, with significantly different beliefs on how education should be developed and what goals it should deliver (Tsang, 2000). Since the economic reform, the leaders formed an unwavering consensus and development strategies that science and education should be strengthened and invested in, in order to build a 'knowledge economy' for future economic competitiveness and national pride. As a result, universities have gained a central place in China's nation building. The state has promoted a series of significant higher education policies to assign national and global roles to a number of selected major research

²⁷ As I mentioned earlier in Footnote 4 (see Introduction), in this thesis, higher education policy broadly refers to a wide range of macro and micro level policies on how universities are organised, funded, operated and developed in policy areas including finance, personnel, education, science and research. It includes the making process of the code of conduct, institutions, regulations, and guidelines to address higher education-related public issues (X. Chen & Gao, 2008, p. 120).

universities, and provides them with an unprecedented amount of funding to improve their quality, performance and international standing. The beneficiaries of government investment have since significantly developed their capabilities and influence.

In the meantime, China's governance and policymaking have also become more formalised (Q. Wang, 2014, p. 137), compared to the previous era when policy decisions were rarely based on research or deliberation and the making of education policies was generally a top-down, internal process relying on the view of the top leadership and informal politics (Lo, 1991, pp. 706-708, 719-720; X. Lu, 2008, p. 39; Tsang, 2000). An example of such formalisation is demonstrated by some recent science policy. Li observed that a scientific attitude has made policymaking more open, including a complex process of repeated bargaining, negotiation, assessment, and consensus-seeking from different stakeholders and policy actors, such as government bodies, universities and science communities (Liu Li, 2009, p. 19). The state's increase in procedures and in scientific attitude towards policies may provide new opportunities for universities to become involved in the higher education policymaking process and exert an influence as a main source of technical expertise and professional knowledge.

Yet, the influence of universities does not flow naturally from their position. A rational approach to higher education policymaking requires both a stronger set of bureaucratic principles and institutions and a better knowledge of the education system and market that can only be provided by greater interactions between the government and tertiary institutions. This chapter finds that despite increased formal policy procedures, the system lacks legitimate and functional institutions for bottom-up initiatives. The formal mechanisms and channels through which universities can participate in education policymaking remain dominated by the state in a top-down manner. This has driven universities to explore alternative routes, operate near the boundary of authorised policy channels, and adopt informal, innovative strategies to intervene and influence policy.

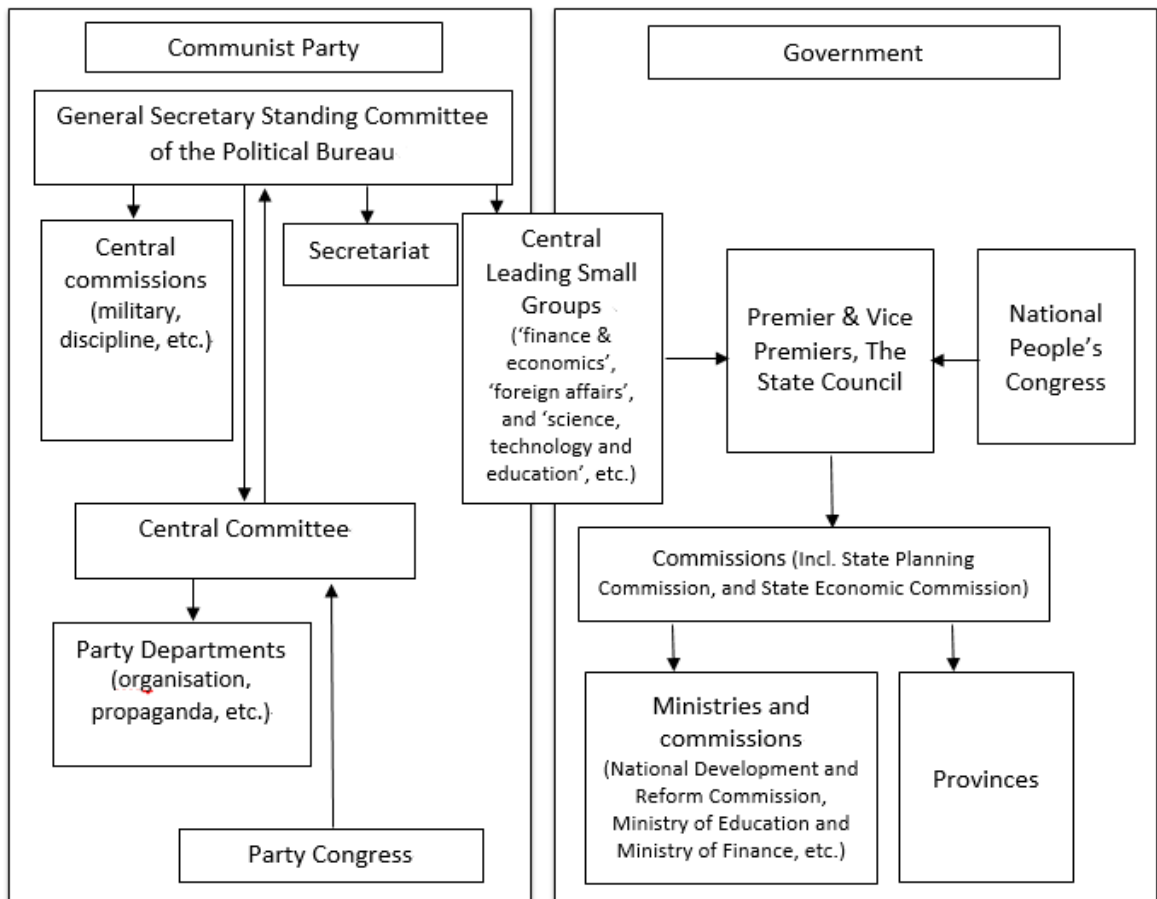
Defining the powers: the central governing institutions

In the Chinese authoritarian structure, national universities are governed by the central bureaucracy, which defines national development priorities, shapes higher education policies, and regulates university practices. China's central bureaucracy is a complex and opaque governance system, allowing a range of central organs and actors, such as party leaders and the State Council, to influence or determine policies that affect universities' operation and development.

This section is intended to help make sense of the central institutions of the national higher education governance and policymaking structure. It is important to clarify that the party and

the government (state) are often regarded as one analytical unit in facing social forces because of their negligible boundary and identical interests (Zheng, 2010, p. 123). In this thesis, I generally refer to this integrated central system as ‘the state’ or ‘the government’.

Diagram 1.1. Central governance structure (People's Daily, 2013; State Council, 2013; Zheng, 2010, p. 64)



Party-state

The Communist Party of China (CPC, or ‘party’ hereafter) is China’s predominant political force.²⁸ While officially it has only a guiding role, it in fact dominates the government and its executive process (Zheng, 2010, p. 100). The leaders at the CPC have the paramount decision-making power in authorising, approving and promoting significant national development guidelines and principles, including substantial education policies; and their personal policy views and directives often lead to new policies or reforms. The party exercises its domination and leadership over the state through establishing powerful mechanisms, including the Central Leading Small Groups (CLSGs).²⁹ The CLSGs sit at the top of the hierarchy of specific policy

²⁸ It is also often called CCP, the Chinese Communist Party.

²⁹ Such mechanisms also include the ‘*nomenklatura*’ system (Party management of cadres system), which will be explained later in the chapter.

portfolios and governance functions, and lead major policy domains, such as finance, economics, foreign affairs, as well as science, technology and education. The CLSGs often become instruments for individual leaders to enforce their personal policy preferences (Zheng, 2010, p. 108).

As power arms of the party that stretch into the state, these CLSGs are ad hoc supra-ministerial coordinating bodies that build consensus on issues that cut across the party, the government and military system when the existing bureaucratic structure is unable to do so (Lampton, 2001, pp. 163-164 ; N. Lu, 2001, pp. 45-49). The CLSGs often focus on setting up guiding principles for concrete policies. Recommendations from leading groups are to be adopted in the policymaking process because they represent the consensus of the leading members of the party, the government, and military agencies. In some cases the policymaking bodies simply adopt CLSGs' recommendations with little or no modifications (Zheng, 2010, pp. 107-108).

Amongst the CLSGs, the Leading Small Group on Science, Technology and Education (LSGST, *guojia keji jiaoyu lingdao xiaozu* 国家科技教育领导小组) is the platform through which the CPC leads China's education, science and research agenda. Formally established on 25 June 1998 by the State Council, the LSGST is tasked with special duties, including deliberations on major national science, technology and education strategies, programs and policies, and the coordination of major policy matters between central agencies and between central and local governments. Many crucial decisions and actions on education, science and research are reflections of the priorities set by the LSGST. The LSGST is chaired by premier of the State Council, who is a member of the CPC Politburo Standing Committee, and is formed by heads of central organs related to education, science and technology, including a vice premier of the State Council, finance minister, head of the National Development and Reform Commission (formerly State Development Planning Commission or 'SDPC'), education minister, science and technology minister, head of Chinese Academy of Sciences, and minister of industry and information technology (State Council, 1998).

China's highest organ of legislature, the National People's Congress (NPC, *quanguo renmin daibiao dahui* 全国人民代表大会), has the authority to enact, amend and monitor science, technology and education laws. However, in reality, the NPC has a rather limited role and capacity in formalising education policies. Some suggest that the NPC is a 'puppet legislative that essentially rubber-stamps party policies' (Shambaugh, 2008a, p. 179). The NPC may intervene in education policies through both the NPC Standing Committee and the Committee of Science, Technology, Education and Health (*jiao ke wen wei weiyuanhui* 教科文卫委员会)

(NPC, 2004).³⁰ However, it is uncommon to form an education-related decision through the NPC. Many proposals cannot be added to the NPC meeting agenda for discussion unless the NPC chair members and special committees have approved them. If approved, they may forward the education policy proposals to the State Council's education departments and demand their response. Nonetheless, the NPC does not have direct binding or restraining authority over the State Council. The central bureaucratic departments only have an obligation to provide responses and explanations rather than act on or resolve proposals (Guobing Zhang, 2010, p. 79).

The State Council holds the executive power of the government, and is responsible for the analysis of education, science and research policies. With its control over information and financial resources, the State Council, rather than the legislative NPC, has the substantial power to initiate policy, draft regulations, and implement policy decisions. The bureaucracies within the highly fragmented State Council are assigned different roles to regulate various sectors and maintain official regulatory authority. The State Council also adjudicates disputes between different ministries and drafts regulations through its Legislative Affairs Office (State Council, 2013).

The Ministry of Education (MoE, *jiaoyubu* 教育部) within the State Council is the primary executive organ for managing Chinese universities as well as for drafting, developing and implementing national education policies and regulations. For national universities (sponsored and funded by the central government), the MoE is their key central authority and supervisor (MoE, 2009). According to Tu (2006, p. 64), more than 75% of all higher education policies between 1985 and 2006 were developed and implemented by the State Council through the MoE.

However, major national science, research and education policies often require joint deliberations involving many relevant central organs. For instance, the 'central personnel work coordination group' (*zhongyang renshi gongzuo xietiao xiaozu* 中央人士工作协调小组) and the Organization Department of CPCCC (ODCPCCC) managed a series of national schemes to attract high-level scholars and postdocs from overseas, including the '1000 Talents Plan' and 'Young 1000 Talents Plan' (1000Plan.org, 2009).³¹ The National Development and Reform

³⁰ The NPC representatives may request the investigation of certain education issues and jointly submit policy agenda, proposals or recommendations. A formal policy proposal can be formed and submitted by a group of at least 30 NPC representatives.

³¹ The 'central personnel work coordination group' was formed by the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (Formerly Ministry of Personnel), MoE and nine other central ministries.

Commission (NDRC) and the MoF also worked with the MoE on the institutional reform and financial issues of national postgraduate education reform.³² Similarly, since 2009, a well-funded 'Pilot training program for outstanding students in basic sciences' (*jichu xueke bajian xuesheng peiyang shiyan jihua* 基础学科拔尖学生培养试验计划) has been jointly managed and implemented by MoE, ODCPCCC, and MoF. In addition, many national science, education, research and innovation programs and policies that universities have participated in are led, developed, funded and administered by central agencies such as the MoST, the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), and the Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC).

Here are a range of central party-state bodies that have roles and responsibilities that are closely relevant to universities and their activities.

The Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee (ODCPCCC, *zhonggong zhongyang zuzhibu* 中共中央组织部) is the topmost authority and executive body over personnel management in the central party-state agencies and their affiliated organisations (CPC News, 2013). It is the chief organ for the 'party management of cadres' (*dang guan ganbu* 党管干部) or *nomenklatura* system (Zheng, 2010, pp. 103-107). This *nomenklatura* system empowers party units to make appointments and dismissals, reserve candidates for positions, and control key personnel's careers. It gives the CPC a dominant say over personnel decisions of all important positions, including university presidents and party secretaries. This is arguably one of the CPC'S most powerful and effective instruments of control over the key positions throughout the bureaucratic system, as well as throughout the party's own hierarchy. As McGregor (2010, p. 69) points out, the party's control over personnel was also at the heart of its ability to overhaul state companies, without losing leverage over them at the same time. A similar mechanism is at work in the appointment of university executives: although the MoE can nominate and recommend candidates, all major national universities' presidents and party secretaries are ultimately appointed by the ODCPCCC. As mentioned earlier, the ODCPCCC also leads major national and international schemes for high-level talents and expert personnel, including the '1000 Talents Plan' (CPC News, 2013).

The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC, *guojia fazhan gaige weiyuanhui* 国家发展改革委员会) coordinates, formulates and implements strategic policies on national economic and social development (including education, science and technology), develops medium and long-term national development plans, and coordinates key development

³² In 2013, for example, representatives from the MoE, NDRC and MoF attended work meetings on this reform, and included Liu Yandong, vice premiere for education, deputy education ministers as well as an assistant finance minister.

projects that involve the central government's investments. In particular, it approves, authorises and reviews key national innovation and research development and construction projects and their funds (NDRC, 2013). It is the top decision-making agency for a national key university funding program named 'Project 211', which funds around 100 major national universities to boost their academic quality and infrastructure. Although the MoE is also involved in the development and implementation of this program, the NDRC retains the final say over important matters and provides the program funding to universities.

The Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST, *kejibu* 科技部) manages the national Science and Technology (S&T) budgets and develops and administers key national S&T projects, including the National Basic Research Program (also known as Project 973, named after its date of establishment—March 1997), and the National High-tech R&D Program (also known as Project 863, established in March 1986). Universities can apply for competitive research funds through the MoST-led programs to support their key national laboratories, innovative bases, and research infrastructures (MoST, 2013). In 2008, amongst 181 national key laboratories, 114 were based at universities (M. Zhang, Zhang, & Yuan, 2008, p. 125).

The Ministry of Finance (MoF, *caizhengbu* 财政部) is the primary central organ to develop fiscal policies, coordinate national financial distributions, and manage central financial revenues, budgets, and expenditures. It formulates the central government's fiscal spending standards and quotas, approves and audits annual expenditures of other central departments, as well as transacts the central funds and supervises the uses for the central government's investment projects, including specific reserved funds (*zhuanxiang chubei zijin* 专项储备资金) (MoF, 2013b). Due to its important financial responsibility and power, the MoF plays an important role in university funding policies. It is accountable for the financial management of the special university funding programs like Project 985 and Project 211, and provides annual budgetary funding to national universities.

The Chinese Academy of Science (CAS, *zhongguo kexueyuan* 中国科学院) conducts research in basic and technological sciences, provides data and advice for governmental decision-making, builds scientific research centres, and undertakes government-assigned projects in regard to key S&T issues (e.g. S&T personnel training). The CAS manages the Knowledge Innovation Program (KIP), from which universities can receive research funding support (CAS, 2014).

Similarly, the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC, *guojia ziran kexue jijinwei* 国家自然科学基金委) selects and financially supports basic research and applied basic research through peer review and evaluation panels, and provides advice on major policy issues related to the national strategic development of basic and applied research. It manages three categories of grants and programs, including research development, talent fostering and

infrastructure construction for basic research, through which universities receive grants from the NSFC (NSFC, 2013).

This landscape of institutions apparently works in coordination under the same master, the CPC. Nevertheless, the fragmentation and overlapping of institutional and financial responsibilities produce a rather complex central environment, one that universities need to navigate, interpret and at times exploit. I will discuss how their power relationships have shaped universities' lobbying practices in Chapters 4 and 5.

The Ministry of Education (MoE)

As mentioned earlier, within the State Council, the MoE remains the core bureaucratic authority to govern the education sector, manage national universities, and develop higher education policies (MoE, 2009). National universities must report to the MoE and interact with its sub-departments routinely.

Like other ministries in the Chinese central government, the MoE is characterised by 'vertical and horizontal fragmentation' (*tiaokuai fenge* 条块分割). It features over 20 sub-departments (or divisions) with different professional expertise and designated responsibilities (*fenguan* 分管) for various education policies (MoE, 2013b). The responsibilities and functions of these departments range from the formulation of policies and plans (*guihua* 规划) to the budgeting and resource allocations for university education and research development programs (see Appendix B—Internal departments of the MoE).

In order to facilitate communications between the MoE and national universities, the MoE requires universities to align their institutional organisational structure with that of the MoE bureaucracy. This is sometimes called 'administrative and functional alignment' (*yewu duikou* 业务对口). Through this alignment system, the MoE sub-divisions can make easy, direct contacts with the university offices with corresponding roles and responsibilities. For example, the MoE Department of Postgraduate Education (doubles as the Office of the State Council Academic Degrees Committee) mostly works with universities' graduate schools on postgraduate education policy development and implementation. The MoE Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges regularly speaks to universities' international offices on international education policies.

The lack of intermediary bodies and advocacy groups

In many other countries, independent 'buffer organisations' or 'intermediary bodies' between the government and universities commonly exist. The goals of these bodies are often to coordinate and balance the relations and interests between various stakeholders in the higher education sector through policy deliberation, consultancy, assessment and appraisal.

Intermediary agencies are typically formed by higher education experts, who work to provide policy studies and policy advice to the government, present universities' requests and concerns to policy decision-makers, and prevent the government's direct interference into university affairs, all of which may help produce good education policies (D. Zhang, 1995, p. 41; G. Zhou, 2006, p. 11).

The State Council acknowledged in 1994 that Chinese intermediary agencies should be developed to encourage wide social participation in education decision-making and education management (MoE, 1994).³³ In a formal presentation to an OECD delegation in Beijing in May 2008, an official from the MoE's National Centre for Education Development Research (NCEDR) said that the Chinese central governance structure would be reduced in size and lead to more integrated and multi-skilled government departments, and an increased delegation of functions to the local levels. As a result, the higher education sector would experience some fundamental changes, such as the development of independent agencies including policy implementation agencies, policy supervision agencies, and policy research and consultancy agencies (X. Yang, 2008).

Although intermediary organisations are emerging in China's higher education sector, their development has been largely controlled by the state. Currently, the majority of the existing intermediary organisations are led and supervised by the state. They mostly operate as an extension of the government authority to help facilitate the government's top-down policy communications with universities and to help the government conduct teaching and research assessments (Zhenyu Zhang, 2005, p. 15; G. Zhou, 2006, p. 146). This is similar to what many scholars have observed: Chinese social organisations in various sectors have very limited autonomy from the state (Unger & Chan, 2008); and many civil organisations perform as 'helping hands' according to the party line and are hybrid organisations in which state and society are interwoven, thus do not meet the minimal definition of civil society, whose component organisations exist outside and independent of the state (Zheng, 2010, pp. 145-147, 216).

One example is the Association of Chinese Graduate Schools, or ACGS (ACGS, 2006). It was initiated and established by the government, with the aim to lead general consultations and seek information or data on university research training. Another example is the Chinese Society of Academic Degrees and Graduate Education (CSADGE), formed by a range of national institutions. Tsinghua initiated and hosts the society, but its operation is subject to the

³³ It was stated in the state's policy document on the implementation of 'China Education Reform and Development Guidelines' (*zhongguo jiaoyu gaige he fazhan gangyao de shishi yijian* 中国教育改革和发展纲要的实施意见).

government's guidance and supervision. Although these agencies are involved in policy issues to a certain extent, their bottom-up advocacy functions remain limited. They mostly operate as service providers under the leadership of the government which confines their personnel appointments and work responsibilities. Zhang has observed that for many government-affiliated intermediary organisations, the staff members appointed by the government are insufficiently qualified for their roles (Zhenyu Zhang, 2005, p. 15).

Leading Chinese universities have also sought opportunities to establish autonomous policy-oriented university groups. Examples include Renmin University's failed proposal for the 'Association of Chinese Research Universities' (Juan Hu et al., 2007, pp. 153-155; Ji, 2008, p. 3),³⁴ and an elite group of nine Chinese leading research universities called 'C9', which has operated since 2003 (see Chapter 3). Generally speaking, such policy groups in the sector are rare exceptions and subject to state scrutiny. The numerous regulatory restraints have encouraged universities to rely more on direct interactions with the government in the policy process. I will elaborate on universities' collective actions in Chapters 3 and 4.

Defining national universities: central sponsorship and supervision

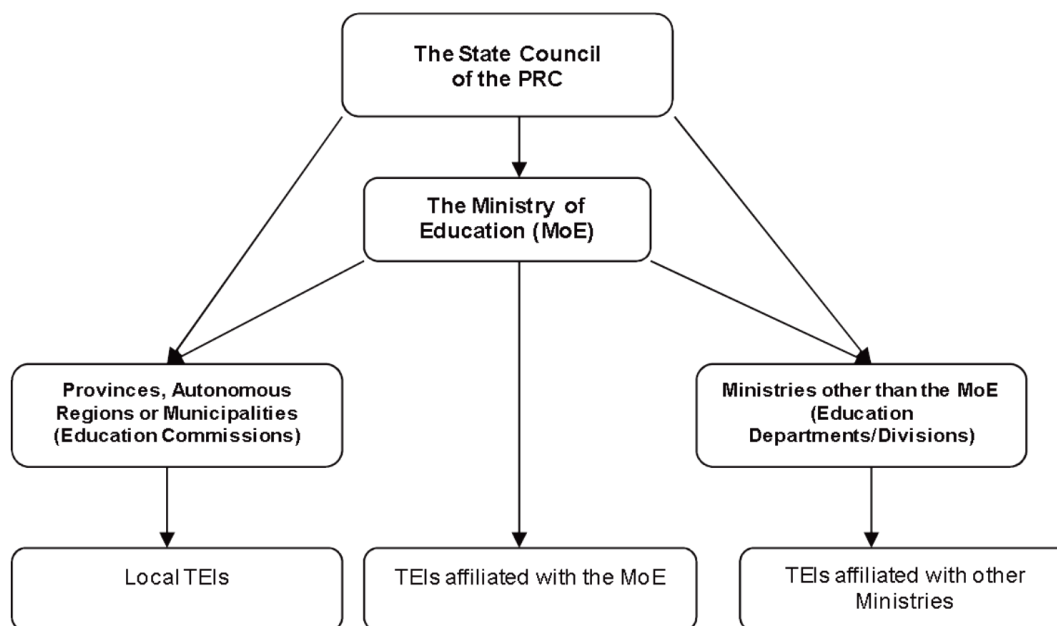
National universities are publicly funded, sponsored and supervised by a central government agency. Other types of higher education institutions, such as local public universities managed by the local authorities, private universities and vocational colleges, are beyond the scope of this thesis. Unless specified, in this thesis 'university' generally refers to a national university.

According to the MoE officials, the governance system for Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs) has two main goals: 'macro-level, nationwide administration' and 'micro-level, individual administration'. The State Council and its subordinate MoE provide macro-level policy, regulation and management of tertiary education, including national guidelines, policies and regulations, funding investment, development and planning. They also supervise other central agencies and the local governments on education policy issues, because many of them also sponsor universities. From the micro-level management perspective, the central

³⁴ For example, Renmin University attempted to gather 15–20 Chinese research universities and form an autonomous intermediary body and advocacy group named 'Association of Chinese Research Universities'. According to Renmin, this association would represent the interests of leading research universities, submit joint proposals to the government, provide higher education policy advice and ideas, and help the government hear universities' development needs and voices. It said that the group would represent the common interests of its members and build a 'communication platform' between top research universities and the government, which would lead to a reduction of the government's micro-management and over-supervision. However, the initiative never really materialised partially due to the lack of consensus on certain issues amongst the potential 'member universities'.

ministries (including MoE) and local governments administer and supervise their sponsored universities directly (C. Liu, 2008). The diagram below illustrates the overall governance structure for higher education and their administrative relationships between the central and local governments and HEIs.

Diagram 1.2. The governing and administrative structure for Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs)³⁵



After the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, China’s higher education was adapted to serve a highly centralised and planned economic system (L.-x. Li, 2001, pp. 106-113), with a strong focus on industrial development and specialised, technical training. Between the 1950s and the start of the Cultural Revolution, the government began to establish special policy on developing national key universities. The operation of the higher education sector was severely disrupted during the ten-year Cultural Revolution during 1966–1976. After 1978, China embraced a new national development route with the economy being its policy centre and focus, and education and research became priorities again for their important roles in national strategic development. Since the mid-1980s, and accelerating through the 1990s, this sector was subjected to successive reforms and decentralisation. Especially in 1998 when China faced economic challenges and a potential unemployment crisis (Y. Wan, 2006, p. 21), the state decided to immediately perform a ‘major operation’ on higher education in order to drive domestic consumption and reduce the unemployment rate. Radical changes in the sector included significant student enrolment expansion, marketisation of the

³⁵ The diagram is reproduced from Figure 2.1 in the *China Country Background Report* prepared by the National Centre for Education Development Research (Gallagher et al., 2009, p. 44; NCEDR, 2007).

system (e.g., introducing tuition fees and allowing privatisation), diversification of funding and revenue sources, and decentralisation and reorganisation of tertiary institutions (e.g., localising universities and allowing institutional mergers) (Y. Wan, 2006, pp. 25-26; Zha, 2009, pp. 54-56). All of these added up to a highly complex sector.

As the consequence of this drastic decentralisation and restructure, only 113 universities amongst over 2,000 HEIs (universities and colleges) in China remained affiliated with and sponsored by the central ministries (i.e., funded and managed) in 2013, in comparison to 367 centrally funded universities in 1994.³⁶ Amongst the centrally funded universities, 73 operated under the jurisdiction of the MoE and 40 were supervised by other central ministries or agencies (MoE, 2014e). While these national universities accounted for only a fraction of the total, they constitute an elite and are greatly privileged through national policy and funding.

These centrally funded national universities remain the flagships of China's higher education system, and are regarded as the key agents in the official goal of building a world-class tertiary education system. The expansion in student numbers also further strengthened their position. Chinese national statistics demonstrate that since the 1999 higher education expansion, leading, national universities have seen a more modest student expansion (from 1.36 million in 1997 to 1.63 million in 2005) and in some cases have focused mostly on postgraduate enrolments, while local universities, private institutions, and other higher vocational colleges carried the major responsibility for expansion and accounted for 95.3% of all increased enrolments (from 1.79 million in 1997 to 11.89 million in 2005) (Zha, 2011a). The elite part has become an even smaller proportion in the sector. As the *OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education—China* (2009, p. 43) describes the Chinese higher education system:

While fragmentation and diseconomies of scale continue to represent a risk to the achievement of an integrated and holistic approach to policy, the Chinese higher education sector is characterised by diversity which is a considerable strength. In a rapidly developing economy, subject to massive social change, the sector possesses a range of institutions which can meet a wide range of social and economic needs and demands.

National universities' affiliation with the central state

Central affiliation and sponsorship consolidate the direct central governance over universities. Each national university must have at least one sponsoring ministry or agency (*zhuguan bumen*

³⁶ In 2013, amongst 2,491 regular higher education institutions in China, 1,661 operated under local authorities, 717 were privately-run, non-government institutions, and only 113 were affiliated with the central government.

主管部门) in the central government. Universities' central sponsors have the responsibility to provide a certain percentage of their regular block funding. A two-way personnel mobility often takes place between national universities and their sponsoring ministry. Notably, due to the central affiliation, the level of resources and central incomes available to national universities relates to the wealth and power of their central sponsoring organs. Universities sponsored by the MoF, the CAS, or the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), for example, are better funded than some universities with other sponsors.

All national universities are required to report to the MoE regularly. This includes those national universities that are affiliated with other central agencies. It means that these universities are accountable to both their own sponsoring agency and the MoE. Some people jokingly describe this 'dual supervision' system as a 'double-whammy situation'.

There are significant direct policy interactions between national universities and the MoE, regardless of their official affiliation and sponsoring organs. This is especially true of the highly academic and technical education policies, such as research training, of which the other central organs lack the expertise and professional knowledge. National universities have also actively participated in policy consultations by the other agencies such as the MoST and CAS on the drafting of research policies and regulations.

National universities' dependence on central funding

China's funding for university education and research has increased significantly over the last several decades, thanks to a series of national strategies and policies that are epitomised by slogans such as 'invigorating the nation through science and education', which I will illustrate later in detail. Research funds provided to universities, for instance, nearly doubled from 46.8 billion yuan (USD 7.49 billion) in 2009 (NBS, MoST, & MoF, 2010) to 85.77 billion yuan (USD 13.74 billion) in 2013 (NBS et al., 2014), presenting an average annual increase of 16.5%.³⁷ The figure was only 24.23 billion yuan (USD 3.88 billion) in 2005 (NBS, MoST, & MoF, 2006). Investment in national education increased from 28.597 billion yuan (USD 4.58 billion) in 2000 (MoF, 2001) to 388.39 billion yuan (USD 62.2 billion) in 2013 (MoF, 2014a). In 2012 it reached 4% GDP at 378.155 billion yuan (USD 60.56 billion) (MoF, 2013a). Despite the exciting economic investments and rapid improvement of infrastructures, national universities have become significantly dependent on the central government and lacked alternative major sources of income. Statistics show that between 1999 and 2009, government funds accounted for 47.65%–60% of total revenue of average universities, student fees accounted for 33.49%,

³⁷ Data are sourced from the *National S&T Funding Statistical Bulletins (quanguo keji jingfei touru tongji gongbao 全国科技经费投入统计公报)* from 2009 to 2013.

and less than 1% came from social sources and this continued to decrease each year (D. He, Yang, & Ouyang, 2013, p. 94; Jing Zhang & Qu, 2012, pp. 24-25).

The university public funding system can be broadly described as a 'quota formula-based block funding plus special subsidies' (*zonghe ding'e jia zhuangxiang buzhu* 综合定额加专项补助). Routinely, universities receive regular block funding from the MoF based on the student enrolment numbers and funding rates. Funding per student rates and standards vary depending on the regions, levels and types of universities. As to special, temporary subsidies, various special funding programs are irregularly introduced by the central agencies, which reflect the broader national development priorities or aim to meet the special, urgent needs of universities (Qu & Zhang, 2011, p. 61). For example, the MoE implements tailored programs to fund selected universities in specific policy areas which provide significant investments, including a project called 'undergraduate education quality and teaching reform project' (*benke jiaoyu zhiliang yu jiaoxue gaige gongcheng* 本科教育质量与教学改革工程), and an 'elite training program for top basic science students' (*jichu xueke bajian xuesheng peiyang shiyan jihua* 基础学科拔尖学生培养试验计划) (MoF, 2014b). Other schemes, such as Project 985, Project 211 and the 2011 Scheme, are some of the most important special funding subsidies for research universities, which I will explain later in this chapter. These special schemes often include at least a proportion of financial contribution provided by a university recipient's sponsoring ministry.

China's innovation and research funding system is complex, providing multiple funding streams for universities. The MoST, CAS, NSFC and some other central organs manage a wide range of research funding schemes that are open to universities' applications and competitions. The central funding distribution model for universities is tightly planned. The government defines research priorities, and develops projects and programs (*gongcheng xiangmu* 工程项目) based on those priorities to channel universities' activities towards meeting the state's nation-building objectives. A large proportion of research funding is supplied to universities through such short-term, temporary projects. Universities have to constantly readjust their focus to fit into these programs and secure more funding.

National universities' autonomy

Besides deciding on funding priorities and allocations, the Chinese government dominates national universities in numerous ways. Individual universities and colleges in China possess rather limited institutional autonomy compared to the standards of OECD countries (Gallagher et al., 2009, pp. 44-45). For a long period after 1949, universities were mostly part of the government's administration system, and their legal status was unclear. Despite significant socio-economic changes and a Higher Education Law approved in 1998, Chinese universities

still appear to be quasi-government institutions (Jianhua Hu, 2002, pp. 64-66; H. Jiang et al., 2005, pp. 92-93). The party remains the highest authority in the universities. The central government appoints university leaders and intervenes in university operations excessively. Mok (2001, p. 123) argues that the state has actually strengthened, rather than relaxed, its regulation and coordination role in the education sector since the decentralisation. The government's policy rhetoric suggests a 'loosening' of centralised government control to ensure universities' autonomy is far from the reality (R. Yang et al., 2007, pp. 588-589). Academic and operational aspects of universities, such as the conferrals of academic degrees, academic quality assessments and audits, national student admissions, university entrance examinations, and the use of government funds, are all centrally regulated by the MoE. I will elaborate on university autonomy by drawing on numerous personal interviews in the next chapter.

National universities and their local governments

National universities are directly governed and funded by the central government, but they still need to seek support from their local authorities for a range of regional policy and operational matters, such as campus infrastructure construction and expansion of students and staff housing. One typical case is the need to deal with the human resources departments within their local governments for matters including personnel employment contracts, staff transfer and retirement, as these personnel and residential policies are subject to the local rules.³⁸

National universities have significant incentives to cultivate good relationships with the local governments, including fiscal benefits and favourable nomination of national awards. For example, when the central government confers nationwide education awards, it often asks provincial governments to nominate a few universities located in their regions. Only the nominees qualify for the next stage. Some of my interviewees suggested that a good relationship between a university and its local government often helped secure favourable decisions and opportunities.

Many national universities have established regular communication channels with their provincial and municipal governments and their key officials. Their engagement is enhanced through participating in joint council meetings and submitting special reports on the

³⁸ Similar to the administrative alignment with the central bureaucracy, national universities work with the different local government departments for various policy issues. For example, universities' finance offices and S&T offices interact with the local finance departments and S&T departments respectively on specific funding and policy matters.

development of local industries and socio-economic policymaking issues. Over recent years, the role and responsibility of local governments in education have increased. Local governments have promoted partnerships with leading universities to drive regional economies and social development through research commercialisation, knowledge sharing, and talent training. Some national university funding programs, such as Project 985, require local governments to share the costs and adopt a 'central-local joint development' model (*gongjian* 共建) to co-fund the '985' universities. For example, in 2010, the wealthy Shanghai government (Department of Education) paid Fudan University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University 1.3 billion yuan each under the Project 985 to 'match the central fund' (MoE, 2012a). Generous support sometimes comes with strings attached. According to my interviews, some local administrations have become keen to intervene in the development of these centrally-managed universities, and ask universities to prioritise and advance their regional development ideas.³⁹

Notably, the affluence of the regions and the local governments where universities are located affects the funding available to them. Coastal provinces are generally wealthier than the inland provinces, hence universities on the eastern seaboard, such as Shanghai, are able to enjoy the advantages and additional resources emanating from the robust economy and have better access to other revenue streams including commercialisation and donations.

Defining national priorities: science and education policies in the nation-building strategies

How can we understand Chinese universities' role and opportunities in the nation? Since the beginning of the 1980s, the Chinese government has announced and promoted a series of significant national strategies and policies to strengthen the role of science and education in nation building. They placed higher education at a central place to accomplishing the state's plans and goals. Universities, especially a relatively small number of major national research universities, were assigned important national and global roles, and have so far received huge investments for improving their performance and functions. The capabilities and influence of these elite, leading players have grown significantly over the last few decades. According to Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking World of Universities (ARWU), 19 Chinese universities

³⁹ For example, a local government provided a large amount of funding to several 985 universities in its region. To seek quick return from its investment, it proposed a '60:40' system, which meant 60% of the 985 fund they put in should be used and decided by the universities autonomously, but the other 40% should be used for delivering the local government-led programs. These programs were relevant to the regional development priorities. This suggestion received resistance and disagreement from the national universities it funded.

entered the top 300 in 2014, three times more than in 2004 (six). Nine Chinese universities have become top 200 universities compared to only one in 2004 (ARWU, 2004a, 2014a). Some of the best Chinese universities, such as Peking University (PKU) and Tsinghua University, have climbed over 100 places between 2003 and 2014 from the 201-300 range to the 101-150 range (ARWU, 2014b, 2014c). This section of the chapter describes these substantial government strategies and policies that have had far-reaching impact on the university sector's development trajectory, and changed many universities' destinies.

'Invigorating the nation through science and education' and 'knowledge economy'

In 1995, the Chinese government issued a significant document on 'accelerating the advancement of science and technology' (*zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu jiasu kexue jishu jinbu de jueding* 中共中央国务院关于加速科学技术进步的决定) (MoST, 1996). This was the first time that the CPC and State Council established a long-term national strategy of 'invigorating the nation through science and education' (*kejiao xingguo* 科教兴国). The document emphasised that science and technology were the primary driving factors for the country's productivity, and education was a national foundation, hence it was central for China to strengthen its capabilities in both science and education to raise citizens' personal cultivation and refinement (*suzhi* 素质 or 'quality'), accelerate national economic productivity and to revitalise the country (X. Shi, 2006).

To implement this decision, the government first held a national science and technology conference in May 1995, at which President Jiang Zemin made a speech on education (Xinhuanet, 2003). He pointed out that this significant, new national strategy should be carried out attentively, and the country should strive to boost education and the commercialisation of scientific research. In this context, the CAS submitted a timely report to the Central Committee of CPC and the State Council in December 1997, entitled 'Embracing the age of knowledge economy and developing a national innovation system' (*yingjie zhishi jingji shidai, jianshe guojia chuangxin tixi* 迎接知识经济时代, 建设国家创新体系). It was the first time where the term 'knowledge economy' was formally used by the Chinese state. Here, the CAS defined it as one that relied on the generation, dissemination and application of knowledge and information. The CAS suggested that the knowledge economy would play a dominant and leading role in the international economy of the 21st century. Hence it offered a vision of building a national knowledge innovation system for the new century, and advocated that China should concentrate its support and funding on the key leading players, so that 'by around 2005, 10 national research universities, 100 national research institutes, and 20 cross-

disciplinary and trans-regional comprehensive national research centres could become internationally competitive' (CAS, 1998a).

This proposal was endorsed and approved by the State Council (CAS, 1998b), and resulted in the national 'Knowledge Innovation Project' (KIP, or *zhishi chuangxin gongcheng* 知识创新工程) led by the CAS (CAS, 2012). 'Knowledge innovation' and 'knowledge economy' became the new buzzwords in the education sector and beyond. As a part of the policy, several new research funding schemes were developed and introduced, such as Programme 973 (or the National Key Basic Research Development Programme) (MoST, 2010a).

More importantly, these national strategies and policies have had significant implications for higher education, because national research universities became included in the policy framework of the national knowledge innovation system (Guobing Zhang, 2010, p. 63), and placed at the core of the national plans for knowledge economy.

'Prioritising key institutions' and 'Project 211'

The designation of key national universities began in the 1980s. The leading universities were often identified and selected, and given special responsibilities and national missions and provided with extra support to strengthen their ability and roles.

In May 1983, the then Chancellors of Nanjing University, Zhejiang University, Tianjin University, and Dalian Institute of Technology penned a handwritten letter to Deng Xiaoping and the State Council. The letter suggested a national policy for investing in a small number of elite national universities and key academic disciplines. This proposal soon received great attention and support from the leadership as the beginning of national policies for key universities (MoE, 1983; People's Daily, 1983). As a result, in 1985, a national education policy 'prioritising key institutions' (*zhong zhong zhi zhong* 重中之重) was implemented, which provided special financial subsidies to a number of leading institutions and later became the foundation for future university funding models, such as special university funding projects (Guobing Zhang, 2010, p. 30).

The 1993 (MoE, 1993) and 1998 (MoE, 1998a) National Education Development Guidelines not only enabled the institutionalisation of a two-tier university system (central and local), but also recognised that a small, elite part of the higher education system will serve as models. The new Higher Education Law passed in 1998 (MoE, 1998b). In June 2002, the 10th Five-year Plan for Education Development (MoE, 2002) stated that Chinese key institutions lacked maturity and strength to lead the national knowledge economy, and could not compete with institutions in developed countries. Improving China's global competitiveness should be the role of national research universities, while local universities and vocational colleges would

meet domestic social demand. These guidelines and policies recognised and supported the important role and special mission of these leading research universities in driving China's global competitiveness, socio-economic growth and human capital development.

The national and global role assigned to these elite universities materialised in some concrete policies allocating concentrated resources to key national universities and key disciplines. In 1993, the MoE announced Project 211, an abbreviation of the 21st century and 100 (approximate number of participating universities), to strengthen and stimulate the academic excellence of some 100 universities and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the 21st century. It was put into operation in 1994. Around 100 universities and a group of key academic programs were selected for funding to improve their quality of teaching (e.g., curricular development and teaching facilities), key disciplinary research, and institutional management and efficiency (MoE, 2008). The number of Project 211 institutions (hereafter '211 universities') increased from 100 in 1993 to 112 in 2011, and the government indicated that it would not expand any further (Xinhuanet, 2011). Broadly speaking, Project 211 has a strong focus on funding key national academic programs at universities rather than on university research. '211 universities' are usually comprehensive in teaching, but not all of them are research-intensive (see Appendix C—Project 211 universities).

'Building world-class universities' and 'Project 985'

Project 211 and the KIP program, together with the national strategies of 'developing the country through science and education' and the rising concept of 'knowledge innovation' and 'knowledge economy', have not only strengthened the elitism policy framework for the university sector, but also laid an important foundation for a forthcoming, new national strategy, which would provide concentrated support to the best research-intensive universities and build them leading global players.

During 1985–1996, several Chinese leading research universities conducted international comparative studies on what it would mean to be a 'world-class university'. 'Building world-class universities' became a development goal and slogan for a number of universities, including PKU and Tsinghua. In 1998, through drafting an official speech for then Chinese President Jiang Zemin at the PKU centenary celebration, PKU successfully persuaded the national leader to endorse 'building globally competitive, world-class universities in China' as part of a larger notion that they are a key component of future economic competitiveness and national pride. As a result, the slogan of 'building Chinese world-class universities' was drummed up and transformed into the Chinese paramount leader's directive as a national development strategy (Min & Wen, 2010, pp. 114-116; Guobing Zhang, 2010, pp. 65-67). Following this development, in order to operationalise the national strategy, PKU and

Tsinghua, with the backing of the MoE, jointly submitted a university funding policy proposal to the state in 1998, which was approved and formally commenced in 1999. This was how a new significant national program Project 985 (as in the fifth month of 1998) was born.

The goal of the program was to build globally competitive, world-class research institutions in the 21st century by concentrating a considerable amount of funding on a very small number of the best research universities (MoE, 2011a). Project 985 recipients were carefully chosen for their capacity and potential to fulfil the national mission and become influential global players in research and innovation. Leaders of these university were encouraged to develop visions and strategic plans that built upon their historic strengths. The National Outline for Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020) announced in 2010 by the government (CPECC & State Council, 2010) reiterated the importance of supporting these selected universities, including offers of greater autonomy and funds for improving academic management.

Since its inception, the number of research universities selected for Project 985 (hereafter ‘985 universities’) increased from two (PKU and Tsinghua), to nine universities (which later formed a university coalition of nine called ‘C9’) in 1999, and to 39 in 2011 (see Appendix D–Project 985 universities). In December 2011, Education Minister Yuan Guiren confirmed that after a few rounds of project expansion earlier in the previous decade no additional universities would be added to the Project 985 (Xinhuanet, 2011). Within the ‘985’ structure, PKU and Tsinghua, have remained the champions and were seen as ‘the elite of the elite’.

In comparison to Project 211, ‘985 universities’ receive much larger funds to boost their research capacity. In the diversified higher education sector which accommodates over 2,200 regular tertiary institutions (including 782 public degree-offering institutions in 2014), the 112 ‘211 universities’ account for the top 5% of all HEIs, and less than 15% of all public degree-offering institutions. The 39 ‘985 universities’ are even more rare and exceptional in number—5% of all public degree-offering institutions.

The brand effects of ‘211’ and ‘985’: university barriers

The official branding of ‘211’ and ‘985’ have truly become gold-lettered symbols for the elite status of universities. It is common for major universities to use these brands to justify and legitimise their prestige and prominence in the hierarchical pyramid of the higher education sector. However, the government attempts to maintain an image of equity and fairness, hence remains reluctant to use these labels to differentiate universities. In reality, the ‘211’ and ‘985’ define various ‘grades’ and ‘ranks’ of institutions, as well as drawing the lines between rich and poor. ‘985’ and ‘211’ universities attract significant government funding resources and enjoy the greatest portion of the total share. According to MoE data, during 2009–2013, for instance,

around 264.8 billion yuan or 72% of the total government funds for scientific research in the higher education sector went to '211' and '985' universities in China (MoE, 2014c; M. Wan, 2014). '985' and '211' universities received over 60 percent of their research funds from financial allocations while non-participating colleges received less than 40 percent. Tsinghua received 3.93 billion yuan (USD 641.1 million) of research funds in 2013. By comparison, Southwest Petroleum University, the top-grossing university not participating in either project, only received 460 million yuan (M. Wan, 2014). In particular, the 39 '985 universities' received the largest share of government research funding of all. 'Thirty years of financial support to Guizhou University still falls short of one year of that allocated to Tsinghua and PKU,' said Zheng Qiang, President of Guizhou University, a '211' but not a '985 university'. Zheng was a former deputy party chief of Zhejiang University, both a '985' and '211 university' (Xinhuanet, 2014b). High investment led to high yields. During 2009–2013, two thirds of all published research papers came from '211' and '985' universities and a large number on national S&T achievements awards (M. Wan, 2014).

In addition to the serious imbalance in funding, '985' and '211' have also widened gaps amongst university graduates for their employment prospects and exacerbated competition for admission into elite universities. A general awareness in society that 'only graduates from key universities count' has emerged. University brand is now an important determinant in parents' and employers' decisions. For college students, a degree from a '985' or '211' university means more than just an honour; it also means a better chance at landing a job after graduation. Although the MoE has banned employment discrimination against students graduating from non-'985' or '211' universities, many job-seekers still see this situation as 'an invisible threshold'.

The issues created by these programs became hot topics and public controversies in late 2014 after rumours and speculations that '211' and '985' would be abolished. In November 2014, the MoE publicly denied this rumour at a university conference in Shanghai, affirming that the two projects have effectively promoted the overall quality of the country's higher education so there is no plan to abandon them but rather to improve them (Xinhuanet, 2014b). The MoE also stressed that the government does not discriminate against non-participating universities and intends to break the '985' and '211' barriers for all universities (L. Xu, 2014b). In late 2014, the MoE requested all '985' and '211' universities submit a comprehensive strategic plan and detailed self-evaluation review papers by March 2015. According to my interviewees, although the '985' and '211' are extended in spirit, they are likely to transform into a new form and funding system. A critical review of these programs will be undertaken in 2020 to evaluate the actual improvements achieved by the program members. The universities have also been

advised by the government that they are no longer allowed to name or promote themselves using '211' and '985' brands. A rumour is that '985' will be renamed and rebranded as 'program for building world-class universities' (*yiliu daxue jianshe* 一流大学建设) and '211' as 'program for building world-class academic disciplines' (*yiliu xueke jianshe* 一流学科建设). Despite the unknown fate, undoubtedly, the '211' and '985' have already created an enduring, deep-seated impact on the hierarchy within the sector.

'2011 Scheme' (Collaborative Innovation Plan)

Similar to Project 985, the significant 2011 Scheme was also established in light of then Chinese President Hu Jintao's official speech on April 24 of 2011 at Tsinghua University's centenary ceremony. Many interviewees acknowledged the direct involvement of Tsinghua in this new national policy. In that speech, Hu stated that China needed to actively promote collaborative innovation, hence universities, scientific research institutes and enterprises should be encouraged to establish strategic alliances, cooperate in selected key fields, share resources and apply their research outcomes. Building on the leader's directive, the MoE and MoF developed the '2011 Scheme' or 'Plan 2011' (or 'Collaborative Innovation Plan', *xietong chuangxin jihua* 协同创新计划) in mid-2012, which offers significant government funding for the successful applicants. The program is open to universities as primary project team leaders and implementers. They are required to explore creative ways to establish 'collaborative innovation centres' with other universities, scientific research institutes, industrial enterprises, local governments and international research teams and organisations. The cycle of the 2011 Scheme is four years, divided into three phases including initial development, assessment and approval, and the performance evaluation. If approved, the 'collaborative innovation centres' will receive special supporting funds from the central government (MoE, 2012b). Unlike Project 211 and Project 985 that are based on the government's funding pre-allocation, the 2011 Scheme runs merit-based, competitive selections for joint research applications.

The 2011 Scheme is often seen as an extension of Project 211 and Project 985 in a different form and with varied focuses, reflecting the changing needs of different development periods of China's higher education. Project 211 and Project 985 focus on comprehensive investment and development at a university level, such as the academic disciplines and research fields, talent training, and internal development of universities. The 2011 Scheme focuses on specific, theme-based collaborative innovation centres (*xietong chuangxin pingtai* 协同创新平台) on a much smaller scale (L. Xu, 2014a).

‘Building new-type think tanks’ at research universities

In April and November 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed the importance of ‘building modern think tanks (*xinxing zhiku* 新型智库) with Chinese characteristics’ as a national strategy at the CPC meetings (CPC News, 2014). His message signals that stronger critical thinking and a rational, scientific approach is needed to support the leadership as it has faced complex social, economic and environmental challenges; Beijing’s needs for policy support from think tanks will increase. As a result of his directive, the MoE released a new plan in February 2014 (MoE, 2014d) to boost the role of universities in advising the government on public policies, including setting up special university-based policy centres and think tanks to carry out research for the policymaking of the central organs. This means that university research departments, particularly in the social sciences, could gear some research more closely to the government’s decision-making processes. The state has increased its support to build its think tanks at Chinese research universities, and valued their strengths in human resources, strong research capacity across disciplines, and active international collaboration (MoE, 2014a).

Since Xi’s April 2013 statement, more new think tanks based at research universities have emerged. Tsinghua, for instance, established a think tank and research institute of national governance in September 2014 to study China’s future development policies. Similarly, Nanjing University set up a national think tank on South China Sea Studies, and Fudan University established the Centre for China Development Model Research, which focuses on social and economic policies.

Government officials and decision-makers have increasingly consulted with think tanks and become more open to their research and suggestions. According to *Beijing Review* (Tang, 2014), faculty members of the National School of Development at PKU are invited to participate in policy discussions before almost every major reform on topics including state-owned enterprises, the stock market, the land system and the medical care system, as well as having been consulted on issues concerning rural development. Similarly, since the beginning of 2002, consultants of the School of Economics and Management of Tsinghua University have been received by several state leaders. Many of their suggestions have been adopted by the government. Professor Hu Angang, Director of the Center for China Studies of Tsinghua University, was invited to participate in the drafting of China’s five-year plans for socio-economic development several times. He said (Tang, 2014):

As think tanks, higher learning institutions could exert significant impacts on decision-makers and society in general through unique ideas and opinions. They are in greater

demand than ever before and embracing this historic opportunity to make a bigger contribution to society.

He revealed that during the drafting of the 12th Five-year Plan (2011–2015), higher learning institutions undertook more than half of the 80 strategic research programs. Besides conducting research projects and writing papers delivered to top leaders, research fellows of these think tanks are invited to give lectures at learning sessions of the members of Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee (Tang, 2014). I will further discuss university-based think tanks later in the chapter.

Unequal dialogue: formal mechanism for universities to participate in government policymaking

So far we have seen that Chinese elite universities were privileged and developed through robust government patronage and funding, and the state seemed to have developed a growing rational approach and desire for universities' knowledge input. But do universities have a say in China's education policy? If so, to what extent and through what channels can they get involved in the formal policy settings?

Based on extensive interviews, this section outlines a range of the formal top-down and bottom-up channels that enable universities to interact with the government and to participate in education policy processes. My research finds that most of the formal policy communication channels are led by the state in a top-down, dominating manner where universities mainly serve as policy expert advisors. Bottom-up initiatives and policy advocacy remain largely restricted and non-institutionalised in the system.

Top-down channels led by the MoE

Increasingly, the MoE undertakes regular information collection and consultations, especially when a major policy or reform is to be introduced. This process may provide opportunities for universities to intervene in the policy process.

First, each year, the MoE routinely conducts general or themed formal meetings with universities, such as annual higher education forums on international education, or workshops on graduate training. The most important one is perhaps the annual university consultation meetings (*gaoxiao gongzuo zixunhui* 高校工作咨询会) hosted by the MoE at the end of each calendar year. This meeting is attended by senior officials (e.g., state councillor, and government executives from the MoE and other ministries), and a large number of university presidents and party secretaries from national universities and a few local universities. The meeting discussions form part of the planning project of the MoE for the following year. Many

university executives I spoke to described this type of government-led university consultation meetings as ‘top-down’, ‘bureaucratic’, ‘empty talks’ and ‘with limited impact’.

Take this annual university consultation meeting for example. In fact, it was initially established by universities as a ‘bottom-up’ policy communication platform, where they invited the MoE to join their discussions on higher education issues so that they could raise policy views and concerns with the officials. However, the MoE soon ‘took it over’, and started to convene and chair it. The purpose, nature and practice of the annual ‘consultation’ meetings were completely changed ever since. Each year, the Education Minister and his deputies address the plenary meeting, followed by a number of smaller, separate sessions where the MoE sub-departments and divisions deliver formal speeches and government reports. According to my interviewees, despite some time allocated for questions, the meetings have become a one-way, top-down ‘convey of directives’ (*yizhi chuanda* 意志传达) with rigid official proceedings and constrained participation by universities. The meeting agendas defined by the government often involve ideas and plans that seem to have already been decided. A university president told me that the conference now only serves one purpose, and it is for the government to ask universities—‘Do you see major flaws in the plans before we formalise and launch them tomorrow?’

Second, the MoE selects certain university executives and academics to form ‘expert panels’ (*zhuanjiazu* 专家组) to provide their input into specific policies. This is especially true of highly technical policy issues. This process enables selected universities to participate in policy discussion and drafting as policy advisors, however with the government’s guidance and control. Compared to the annual university consultation meetings I mentioned earlier, my interviewees have described the ‘expert advisory panels’ as ‘carrying more weight’ and ‘playing a relatively more substantial and meaningful role’ in the policymaking process. However, their discussions are often chaired and dominated by government officials. The panels are often formed after the MoE has already decided an agenda, and the members are commonly selected through existing relationships (see Chapter 5). Notably, there is an over-representation of elite research universities in the policy process.

In terms of the highly technical and professional policies, such as the national energy scheme and academic disciplinary reviews, the government also invites panel members based on a database of experts for various academic areas. Some well-known, established policy advisory panels include ‘academic discipline review groups’ (*xueke pingyizuzh* 学科评议组) under the State Council and the ‘innovation engineering expert group’ (*chuangxin gongcheng zhuanjiazuzh* 创新工程专家组) under the MoST.

Yet, universities still believe that they can exercise influence in this process. As a university vice president who is frequently invited by the MoE to participate in education policy consultations as an expert advisor said:

On behalf of Chinese high-level research universities, I honestly and objectively report to the MoE about the practical and operational challenges that our universities are facing. This is to ensure that the new government policy will consider our needs and facilitate our practices. The MoE is led and run by bureaucrats. However, if we [policy advisors from universities] have good views and ideas, they are still willing to listen to the suggestions.

Individual divisions within the MoE also regularly collect information from and interact with universities in order to keep their 'expert' status on the specific policy matters of their jurisdiction. Each MoE sub-division has developed its own small networks of experts and informants from selected universities, and routinely invites them to attend small workshops and draft new policies. For instance, the MoE Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges involved a range of international directors from certain leading national universities in its development and review of Chinese international education policies. It also invited these advisors to participate in expert panels for the quality assessment of the academic programs jointly conducted by Chinese and foreign institutions. Potentially, these leading universities may take advantage of this 'access' to the government process and seize opportunities to shape policies and advance their interests.

A deputy dean of a graduate school from a leading Beijing university suggested that she was frequently invited by two MoE departments to participate in the writing of numerous policies in recent years. She said:

Before major policies are introduced, the MoE officials generally phone a few of us [deans of graduate schools from several leading universities] to come over, meet up and help them. A few years ago, we worked closely on the new policy on the reform of postgraduate professional degrees, which was eventually approved on the basis of our research findings and policy recommendations. In recent years, we worked with the MoE Department of Postgraduate Education [also the Office of the State Council Academic Degrees Committee] on the reform of the national research training model, and with the MoE Department of College Student Affairs on national postgraduate recruitment reform. All led to a similarly successful outcome. Just last week, I attended a postgraduate recruitment reform meeting chaired by a deputy education minister. The MoE intends to reform the national postgraduate recruitment in the coming years, but it is a sensitive issue, so the MoE is moving very slowly and gradually to play it safely

and avoid any potential negative consequences, especially social instability. In such context, the MoE is keen to seek external support and policy input from professional experts like us.

Third, the MoE routinely conducts fieldwork to national universities on specific topics (*zhuan ti diaoyan* 专题调研) before it drafts and introduces new policies. Various central organs, including the MoST, CAS, MIIT and other ministries also conduct regular visits to the universities they sponsor.

For example, when the MoE intended to develop a policy to ‘improve the financial management of research funds at universities’, it first sent a MoE work team (typically led by a senior official) to conduct a fact-finding mission and visit selected universities. The team reviewed the universities’ practices, challenges and recent developments in relation to the administration of research funds, and met university staff to gather ideas or suggestions. Once completed, the MoE team formulated a report based on the findings and then drafted the new policy. A university vice president suggested that such a form of policy communication is useful for universities in both formal and informal aspects. He said:

Through face-to-face interactions, the government visiting teams often capture a lot of information and feedback from universities beyond the designated policy topics of their visits. It also enables universities to network with the MoE officials informally, seek policy updates, and build personal relationships.

Fourth, the government also seeks direct input and policy recommendations from universities in the form of commissioned research projects (*keti xiangmu* 课题项目). A MoE report released on 7 March 2014 suggests that Chinese universities participated in about 600 projects for national ministries and provided 1,600 consulting reports for the government between 2008 and 2013 (Sharma, 2014). The MoE commonly employs one or multiple institutions to conduct objective, evidence-based research analysis and submit policy recommendations to the government. If it is a major nationwide policy, such as national university scholarships and fees, the MoE is likely to distribute the final report of the commissioned research project to a broader range of institutions for feedback.

For instance, the MoE commissioned a team of national universities led by Tsinghua to study China’s international postgraduate education.⁴⁰ This research project aimed to investigate the current forms of international postgraduate programs in China, collect data and examples, and

⁴⁰ Under commissioned research, a team of experts is typically formed by a few universities but led by one major institution; and the team members undertake regular joint workshops and analysis before complete a report and submit to the MoE.

forecast the future needs and policy development in this area. The MoE requested the research team to make concrete and specific policy recommendations and solutions as the basis for a new government policy. Similarly, two MoE-commissioned national research projects, 'China's postgraduate education in the next 20 years' and 'China's postgraduate education in the last 20 years', were led by Tsinghua and PKU respectively.⁴¹ The MoE asked them to develop concrete policy recommendations that were easy to operationalise and implement.

Fifth, the government funds and leads university-based research centres as its think tanks, such as the Research Institute of National Governance at Tsinghua University and the Research Centre for Science, Technology and Education Policy (RCSTEP) at Zhejiang University. Take the MoE-sponsored RCSTEP as an example. It acts as a permanent policy consultant, providing interdisciplinary research services and expert advice (policy evaluations and recommendations) to various national organs on their research and education programs and funds, including the China Academy of Engineering (CAE), CAS, MoST, NDRC, and NSFC (RCSTEP, 2009). An interviewee from another university-based research centre told me that his centre provided a lot of expert advice and services to the government on the evaluations of the funding of the China Scholarship Council (CSC) scholarship programs. He said, 'We are the government's think tank, because we are at the forefront of program administration and policy execution; and we have extensive experience and strength in applied and theoretical analysis.' A head of a university-based research centre and think tank on South China Sea studies said his centre had built up a new think tank model devoted to basic research but would also 'respond to the country's emergency strategic demands'.

In addition, these research centres produce regular publications and bulletins on policies, which are often provided to government officials for consideration. This may have an indirect influence on broad policy issues, such as drawing the government's attention to certain policy issues and proposing new policy agenda. For instance, a MoE-affiliated research centre located at PKU conducted extensive research on the practices and future development of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCS) in China. Through its publications, the university was able to bring some MOOCS-related issues to the attention of MoE officials who read their journals regularly.

⁴¹ The two projects were formally contracted through the Chinese Society of Academic Degrees and Graduate Education (CSADGE, *zhongguo xuewei yu yanjiusheng jiaoyu xuehui* 中国学位与研究生教育学会). The academic society is initiated by and based at Tsinghua University, formed by a range of national institutions, and supervised and guided by the government.

While the Chinese government invests increasingly in think tanks in order to obtain the best possible advice for technocratic policymaking, it also requests their loyalty to the party. Most of the think tanks are led by a party member, including former politicians or military chiefs but also by top academics aligned with the party. Most of their research is not published openly so as to channel all the policy advice internally within the system (Sharma, 2014). According to *China Business Review*, most Chinese think tanks research social, economic and international relations issues, but only a few engage in sensitive domestic political and military issues (Anonymous, 2009).

Sixth, the MoE bureaucracy established a staff secondment system (*jiediao* 借调) to seek policy support from universities, through which universities may participate in the education policymaking process. Over recent years, the MoE has reduced its size and cut its operational budgets. To save costs and deal with a heavy workload, it regularly 'borrows' staff from universities for various lengths of time. Currently, such secondment positions account for a considerable proportion of the MoE bureaucracy. Some of my interviewees from Beijing told me that about half of the people working at various administrative departments of the MoE were on secondment from universities.

The cost for universities (especially those outside of Beijing) to send their staff to work at the MoE is high. These personnel remain employed and paid by their own universities while on secondment, and their original positions at the universities need to be filled by others. Yet, most universities are keen to participate. This secondment system provides professional development for university staff in a government environment, and improves their understanding of the government policy process. Most importantly, it enables them to network and cultivate personal relationships with the MoE officials, gather intelligence on policy opportunities and influence government decisions. As a university executive suggested:

For many universities, seconding staff to the MoE is a process of intelligence gathering and policy participation 'from the inside'. It facilitates a university to obtain inside knowledge on policy and act on it ahead of other institutions.

Mr Z, a deputy director of the president's office at a Chinese western university H was seconded to the MoE Department of Higher Education. He currently manages the implementation of a range of national university policies and funding programs. At the same time, he conveniently serves as H's liaison manager for its government relations in Beijing. One of my interviewees who previously worked at the MoE under secondment knows Mr Z very well. He told me:

[Z]'s responsibility of managing national programs at the MoE is very important for his university. [Z] knows more than anyone else about the national policies and special schemes, especially the new development projects for funding universities in the western regions. His university has gained significant advantage from [Z]'s secondment position. I can guarantee you that his university has never missed an opportunity to participate in these funding programs and policy. Undoubtedly, the secondment puts [H] in an advantageous and privileged position, and maximises its involvement and success in the government policies.

Notably, MoE officials commonly choose their potential secondment staff through their professional and personal networks, especially from the universities with which they are well connected, or by personal recommendations.

Seventh, through formal written correspondence (*fawen* 发文), the MoE contacts universities directly to introduce and distribute policy documentations and regulations, as well as to collect formal submissions and proposals on draft policy. For example, the MoE contacted universities for feedback on their management and planning of the state-owned assets during its drafting of relevant policy.

In addition, MoE officials often initiate visits and meetings with a small number of universities to discuss specific policy issues. This is especially common for the institutions located in Beijing. This channel enables the participating universities to intervene and shape policy development, however, it is often based on existing relationships and involves informal, private interactions. I will discuss this topic further in Chapter 5.

Bottom-up channels initiated and driven by universities

There are limited formal channels for bottom-up initiatives. Open policy advocacy remains largely restricted and non-institutionalised in the system. University presidents, for example, may formally request the investigation of certain education issues or propose new education policy agenda at the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), as many university leaders are also NPC and CPPCC representatives. Former Zhejiang University President Yang Wei, for instance, at a NPC meeting raised a policy suggestion with a number of other NPC members, calling for new policies to facilitate greater social support, resources and donations for HEIs. However, neither the NPC nor the CPPCC has direct binding or restraining force for the central bureaucratic departments to follow through and take concrete actions. University executives suggest that such formal bottom-up channels are generally ineffective and insignificant in their interactions with the government.

As a result, universities are driven to informal and alternative means for policy advocacy, and to explore non-normative paths that are near the boundary of authorised channels. For example, university executives or professors submit special petitions to senior officials and national leaders when there is an urgent, critical matter requiring immediate high-level attention and decision-making shortcuts in the complex bureaucratic procedures. Top executives and prestigious professors of Tsinghua and PKU have adopted this strategy numerous times. They jointly submitted private letters and reports to state leaders (e.g., vice premier and state councillor for education, and finance and education ministers) to raise policy concerns and recommendations, or to seek special permission for new policy reform trials. This direct, bottom-up policy approach is described by many interviewees as extremely effective, especially when the petitioners are influential figures with personal access to the high-level decision-makers. However, submitting joint letters with group signatures (*jiti qianming* 集体签名) is commonly considered politically sensitive and ‘near the boundary’ of what the state would tolerate. Officials may interpret this gesture as a collective challenge and confrontation, which can cause backfires. Universities use this risky approach with great caution.

Other bottom-up initiatives include sponsoring government visits, hosting government policy workshops or forums on campus and inviting officials to attend. These means increase universities’ influence and face time with officials for direct policy discussions, as well as facilitating personal relationships. A good example is when PKU invited Jiang to its campus several times to promote the university and the ‘building world-class universities’ strategy, which later resulted in Project 985 (Min & Wen, 2010, p. 115).

A vice president of a leading national university commented on its bottom-up advocacy strategies:

Informal lobbying channels, such as through personal connections, typically play a more significant role in influencing policies and government decision-making [than formal channels]. However, it is hard to trace, record or verify, because such informal interactions between universities and the government are implicit, random and covert in nature.

Concluding remarks

Over the past three decades, the government has launched a range of science and education policies to sustain national socio-economic growth, which have provided significant opportunities to universities, especially a small number of elite research institutions. Assigned a strategic role in driving China’s global competitiveness, the leading universities have received large investments and strengthened their capabilities and influence. They have also increased

their involvement as policy advisors in the government's technocratic policymaking processes. This is partially thanks to the increasing bureaucratisation and scientific approach of central policymaking, since these universities are seen as a main source of technical expertise and intellectual legitimacy. Yet, the influence of universities does not flow naturally from their position. A rational approach to higher education policymaking requires both a stronger set of bureaucratic principles and institutions, and a better knowledge of the education system and market that can only be provided by greater interactions between the government and tertiary institutions.

When we look more deeply at the system, we notice some fundamental flaws. Higher education policymaking continues to feature a top-down, authoritarian approach, with the ultimate goal to drive high efficiency and speed in GDP growth. It largely reflects Deng Xiaoping's famous words: 'no debates, just do it' (Zha, 2011b). Major higher education policy decisions remain justified by an appeal to, or thinking of, a paramount leader whose directives are translated into national development strategies and education priorities through various fragmented central bodies, especially the MoE. In the meantime, in the political and regulatory space, Chinese national universities are considerably dependent on government funding, and are subject to direct leadership and intervention from the central bureaucracy in nearly every aspect of their operations, from central appointments of university leaders to student admissions.

In particular, despite the increasing government consultations, most of the formal policy participation and communication channels remain dominated by the government in a top-down manner where universities serve mainly as expert policy advisors. University executives and academics explained that in the formal policy processes, they have 'a highly hierarchical, bureaucratic and dysfunctional' relationship with the government. The government is the superior authority and universities are the subordinate. This does not accommodate equal dialogue. As Zheng (2010, p. 143) suggests, the Chinese government has 'an aversion to bottom-up initiatives' and is more comfortable with the top-down approach, through which it is able to 'keep developments in check'. Although the state has made moves, in response to China's socio-economic change, to broaden its social base by engaging different social forces that have emerged, universities' bottom-up initiatives and policy advocacy role remain largely restricted and non-institutionalised in the system. As a result, for higher education and research policies which impact on their institutional interests, the universities' attempts to influence policy have been driven to take other unauthorised and informal paths, and their advisor and advocate roles become merged in practice. Their growing policy expert advisory

role creates more opportunities and leverage for direct lobbying, and strengthens their credibility and capacity to operate more effectively as policy advocates.

As in most nations that strive for both socio-economic mobility and economic competitiveness, universities hold a unique role in society as places for innovation and reflection, of tolerance and dissent. Yet their full maturation takes time, reflective of the societies that give them life and the need for consistent and long-term financial and political support (Douglass, 2012, p. 664). Facing opportunities and constraints, Chinese universities have developed rising ambitions and demands for government policies that underpin their growth and maturity. Having gained an important place at the policy table, they need to speak out and play an active role in the policy domain to promote their interests and address concerns (H. Jiang et al., 2005; J. Xu, 2012). Later in the thesis, I will show that the leading Chinese universities have indeed become proactive and creative in utilising both formal and informal channels to mobilise their social and cultural capital to shape policy. This may include taking advantage of their credentials as experts and policy advisor role in the formal process, as well as deploying informal strategies that are near the boundary of authorised channels.

The next chapter will investigate how Chinese research universities perceive their missions, roles, rights and constraints in the changing social, economic and political environment, and how their understanding of these issues shapes their objectives and priorities in their policy interactions with the state.

Chapter 2—Deepening engagement in policies: universities as social, moral and political actors

A university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for progress, for the adventure of ideas and the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives. If universities discharge their duties adequately, then all is well with the nation and the people.

Jawaharlal Nehru addressing the graduates of Allahabad University in 1947

Introduction

Despite the impacts of the political, policy and regulatory context on universities' operations and strategies, how Chinese research universities perceive their roles and missions in the changing social, economic and political environment remains at the core of their motivations and actions. One question that is not openly discussed by ministerial or academic leaders in China is whether research universities are 'simply reflections of their own society, subject to its local cultural and political norms, or are universities societal leaders, places for cutting-edge thought and debate?' (Douglass, 2012, pp. 642, 659).

The truly great universities of today and tomorrow have strong traditions of academic freedom that allow faculty and students to openly critique society and national leaders, and provide for wide latitude in the kinds of research that academics may pursue and the courses they teach (Douglass, 2012, pp. 658-659). China's national research universities, even the most influential ones, endure inadequate institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and are subject to tight state controls.

Drawing on numerous interviews with university leaders and administrators, this chapter investigates how the elite Chinese national research universities perceive, reflect and interpret their roles, missions, rights and influence; how they view the key constraints in the policy environment that hinder their operations, scholarly nature and long-term development; as well as how they perceive their capacity to negotiate different entitlements and to influence these policies. Their understanding of these issues is likely to determine their objectives, strategies and priorities in their policy interactions with the government.

Universities as social actors: pursuing public interests

How do Chinese research universities perceive themselves in this rapidly changing nation? My interviewees from leading research institutions have demonstrated strong views and beliefs in

their universities' missions to pursue the public interests and in serving critical roles in Chinese society.⁴²

Long-term missions

My interviewees define research universities' long-term missions and contributions to society as based on academic striving for knowledge discovery and free exploration. Like their counterparts in other countries, Chinese research universities are distinguished by the quality, breadth and depth of their commitment to knowledge. They see themselves as repositories of the wisdom of past generations and centres for the ongoing development of new ideas, technologies and talents and, very importantly, a space of exploration. They recognise that their inherent nature is to constantly explore the basic truth and unknowns, and their role is to advance, integrate and transmit human knowledge that drives socio-economic developments. They strive to broaden their capabilities, foresee the future, improve every aspect of society, and help governments and businesses deal with unexpected challenges.

In particular, my interviewees share a common ideal that freedom of inquiry is essential if research is to realise the benefits of which it is capable. To fulfil their long-term missions and roles successfully, Chinese research universities need to operate in a supportive policy environment that provides consistent funding resources, and sufficient autonomy and space for development, with minimal external interference and pressure for short-term concerns.

Despite increasing investment in higher education, the Chinese state has pressured universities to deliver short-term nation-building projects and to be more accountable for the results they achieve with the resources available to them. It assesses and rewards university performance by focusing on just some of the direct services or outputs that universities provide, or on narrow aspects of their individual services. In university executives' minds, these measures seriously underestimate the contributions that universities make, and hinder their long-term development. In the words of one university executive:

Research universities produce far-reaching benefits and substantial values to almost every aspect of the nation and world ... It is important for government leaders to understand that universities are critical national assets and deserve long-term

⁴² Compared to their strong awareness of national identity, roles and duties, Chinese national research universities have not demonstrated a strong sense of their global identity or responsibilities. This is partially due to their current development phase. The Chinese government has assigned important roles to a number of research universities to improve China's global competitiveness and advance its tertiary education sector to a world-class level, so in the last two decades they have primarily focused on catching up with the rest of the world and competing on the international stage rather than serving the global communities and addressing global issues.

investment and policy support. The contributions and achievements of our research universities should not be evaluated and measured in purely technical terms or immediate results ... The government should not expect or pressure research universities to only address its present concerns.

Another senior university director shared a similar view and related it to his university C:

[C] is famous for its basic science research and discoveries. But [C] neither trains the 'applied' type of talents, nor undertakes much commercialisation. It may take a very long time to show the actual results or visible benefits of its fundamental research. However, China really needs to have universities like [C], for its long-term contributions and in-depth values to the nation and society. Universities like [C] should be supported and encouraged to explore and research freely ... One should not expect them to generate output or profits in the short term.

A joint international declaration on contemporary research universities signed by a group of Chinese research universities echoes and advocates such a view. In October 2013, the Consortium of China Nine Research Universities (also known as the C9, a Chinese research university group formed by the first nine Project 985 institutions) jointly issued a Hefei Statement with the American Association of Universities (AAU), League of European Research Universities (LERU), and the Group of Eight Australia (Go8). The document outlines the characteristics and values of research universities, and in particular, the policy environment that is needed to support them (Go8, AAU, C9, & LERU, 2013; Yuefang Wang, 2010).⁴³ It was the very first time that Chinese elite research universities publically defined their roles and values as well as aligning themselves with their international partners' policy advocacy.

Serving the government and society

Senior university executives I interviewed recognise their universities' ongoing responsibilities and duties to serve the nation and society through producing, disseminating and applying knowledge. They have also highlighted in their discourses that their institutions are well aligned to the central government's development goals and needs.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Chinese research universities are expected to perform a national and global role and accomplish the government's objectives of building the nation, including developing the knowledge economy, training and attracting high quality human capital, and strengthening China's global reputation and competitiveness. The Chinese research universities

⁴³ Hefei Statement's formal title is 'Hefei Statement on the Ten Characteristics of Contemporary Research Universities'.

have strived to improve their quality and capabilities so that they can better fulfil these assigned responsibilities in the nation and society. Their university leaders have become more mindful, strategic, accountable and proactive in this respect.

A university president told me:

As national research universities, we are funded and led by the government. We are at the service of the government, nation and society, and we pursue the public interests ... I often meet with other Chinese university presidents. The common questions we ask ourselves include 'how should our universities train talents that fit China's needs through our research and teaching activities?', and 'how can we better serve our society and local communities, and drive our national competitiveness during China's economic transformation?'

In his book on business lobbying in China, Scott Kennedy suggests that the larger an enterprise, the greater its input is into policy (Kennedy, 2008, p. 170). This seems also true with universities. The leading research universities have strengthened their involvement and contribution into government policymaking by utilising their knowledge and expertise. They have been playing an active role in providing expert services and advising the national and local governments on a wide range of complex policies that go beyond education. Examples include the national medical reform, economic policies, and energy efficiency and carbon reduction schemes which involve large state investments.

As a university executive pointed out to me, in order to seek direct policy support from university advisors, the Chinese central government has made special arrangements with a list of top research universities. It set up 'direct information points' (*xinxi zhibao dian* 信息直报点) through special phone lines and other communication channels with some university experts and specialists (*zhuanjia zhitong zhuanxian* 专家直通专线) for various policy areas. University-based research centres and think tanks, which I illustrated in Chapter 1, are also common platforms for universities to provide policy services to the government. By contributing their knowledge and insights, research universities help improve the quality and rationality of national socio-economic policies and can have far-reaching impact on social wellbeing.

In addition, many executives from research universities believe that they have a 'historical mission and responsibility' to strengthen China's international profile and influence through research and education. For example, a president from a top humanities-focused university stressed to me that his university strives to advance China's humanities, cultural and social research. The goal is to 'better serve the nation and promote Chinese language, philosophy and culture to the world, so that China will be better understood internationally'.

According to interviewees at the research universities I visited, building themselves to be world-class players in higher education, talent training and innovation is a key to strengthening China's global reputation and competitiveness. An interviewee explained:

High quality research universities are strategic resources for national development in every aspect, such as economies, human capital, and national defence technologies. Especially, it becomes increasingly evident that talents play an unprecedentedly important role in the global competition. World-class research universities not only foster and train talent within the country, but also are centres for attracting and retaining high-end talent from other countries... It will provide long-term benefits to China and the government if we have world-class research universities. It should be our strategic priority to build world-class universities.

Leading the sector

My interviewees hold a strong view that leading research universities advance the interests of the Chinese university community, and act as the driving engine and policy reform pioneers in the development of the Chinese higher education sector. As a university president said: 'the higher one stands, the further one can see', suggesting that the leading institutions stand in the forefront of the sector and are most visionary and proactive actors. For instance, they lead the way in institutional management innovation and academic performance, set high benchmarks in the sector, inspire other institutions and advise the government on new practices and policy ideas. A university executive from an elite institution said:

A university's vision, quality, positioning, and development status are all closely related. Institutions of different qualities and visions have different thinking patterns and concerns. The ideas of leading research universities are more developed and advanced than those of second-tier and third-tier institutions. Such gaps were very obvious at our joint, sector-wide meetings, where the second and third-tier universities discussed issues that we [leading research universities] dealt with five, ten years ago. They can learn from us ... They also want to influence government policies, but their efficacy is limited. Most government officials are well aware of the significant gaps in capacity and viewpoint between different levels of institutions in the sector, so they [government officials] work much more closely with us [leading research universities] on policies than with others.

Numerous anecdotes recounted by my interviewees support such observations that the government relies more on elite universities on education and research policy issues than on other institutions. In 2012, for instance, the government held a formal consultation meeting

with over 30 institutions on the ‘reform of the professional qualification examinations’ (*tongdeng xueli kaoshi gaige* 同等学力考试改革). After the formal meeting procedures ended, the government convenor sent text messages to only six people from a few leading research universities and organised a separate, private meeting for more concrete policy discussion and detailed suggestions. Such episodes happen regularly.

Furthermore, the leading research universities play a proactive role in innovating university practices and proposing higher education policy ideas, which benefit the development of the entire sector. The two most prestigious Chinese universities, PKU and Tsinghua, for example, often develop and experiment with new policies in various operational and academic areas, such as research training models, university staff salary and welfare packages, management of high-end academic personnel, university fund raising, facilities development, performance evaluation and review indicators, as well as academic disciplinary development and quality assurance systems. Many of their innovative policy ideas and trials have inspired other universities and the government, later being expanded and introduced to the rest of the university sector.

Universities as moral actors: values and people

Historically, education has been highly valued and respected in China (Kipnis, 2011, pp. 90-94, 173, 181). Glory and praise have been attached to education success, and higher learning institutions possess significant influence in Chinese society (Kipnis, 2011, pp. 36-39). Despite a series of university misconduct scandals brought to light by the media in the recent years,⁴⁴ educational institutions, especially the prestigious research universities, remain generally highly regarded. These academic organisations are commonly perceived as respectable, ethical oases in China’s corrupt political system, embodying traditional values, intellectual superiority, as well as public goods and accountability. Chinese political leaders have often used elite universities as a platform for making political pronouncements and conveying political messages. Visiting or speaking at a university is seen as a much more respectable activity than visiting a large corporation for the same purpose, where people might see collusion or conflict of interest (C. Chen, 2009, pp. 43,47; Sharma, 2011).

⁴⁴ For example, in 2009, an associate professor in journalism from Fudan University was sued for academic plagiarism (Wen, 2009). In 2013, a leading professor from Zhejiang University was charged for embezzlement of research grants (Larson, 2013). In 2013, two leading professors from Nanjing University were accused for data falsification in their papers (Y. Jin, 2013).

University leaders and academics

'Universities are protected and respected places. University leaders and academics are also well respected and have social influence,' a university vice president from a leading institution pointed out to me. University academics are generally considered creditable, authoritative and unbiased with intellectual superiority. Chinese authors have reported numerous cases where prominent academics gained the national leaders' trust and influenced their personal views on education and research policies. For example, an 'expert consultation group', consisting of some 20 senior scientists, including Zhou Guanzhao (physicist and chairman of CAS) and Wang Xuan (a professor at PKU and founder of the Laser Typing System), shaped the overall government strategy for the significant Medium and Long-term Development Plan for Science and Technology (Liu Li, 2009, p. 21). Chinese engineers Wang Ganchang, Wang Daheng, Yang Jiayi, and Chen Fangyun lobbied the government on funding support for hi-tech research, a proposal which received endorsement by Deng Xiaoping and became a significant national research funding policy (MoST, 2010b). Academics' credibility, expertise and knowledge are increasingly valued and demanded by the national policymakers.⁴⁵ Their involvement in public policies as policy advisors has grown over recent years (Min & Wen, 2010, pp. 37, 94; *Xinjingbao*, 2011; T. Xu & Zhang, 2011; Zha, 2011a, p. 56).

In China, leaders of research universities are typically senior academics. Their executive positions at universities further enhance their personal status and influence in society as well as supporting their university–government interactions.⁴⁶ As a university vice president said, 'If you are a professor, people will treat you with respect, but if you are a university president, people will take you more seriously.' Some interviewees observed that in recent years, many well-known retired university presidents from top research universities have acted as 'education counsellors' of the State Council. One university executive explained that the MoE

⁴⁵ One notable example is Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2014 strategy on 'developing think tanks' aimed at getting the best possible advice for technocratic policymaking from academic and professional experts (see Chapter 1).

⁴⁶ Important to note that when university leaders are involved in national and local education policy processes, they often have a dual role: advising the government as an expert advisor, as well as a policy advocate advancing their institutions' interests. For example, in May 1983, academic leaders and then Chancellors of Nanjing University, Zhejiang University and others penned a handwritten letter to Deng Xiaoping and the State Council, suggesting a national policy for investing in a small number of elite national universities and key academic disciplines. This proposal soon received support from the leadership marking the beginning of a series of national policies to fund key universities (MoE, 1983; *People's Daily*, 1983). In 1998, the leaders (and also education experts) of China's elite institutions Peking University and Tsinghua University jointly lobbied the government on a new university funding Project 985, which was implemented in 1999 and changed the development trajectory of Chinese higher education (Min & Wen, 2010; Guobing Zhang, 2010).

officials show a lot of respect to universities presidents' policy views and suggestions. He said, 'Many officials are aware that the weight of their own vision and knowledge cannot compare with the university leaders', so they cannot take their opinions lightly.' A university president also shared with me his personal experience, 'We [university presidents] are respected by the government and by the public. Every time I visit the MoE, the heads of divisions would be keen to meet me.'

University leaders' high status is partially a result of universities being functionally aligned and integrated with the national government bureaucracy. Such alignment includes the hierarchical organisational structure and the administrative ranks for their personnel. For instance, university party secretaries, presidents, vice presidents, directors and deans are all assigned an administrative rank (*xingzheng jibie* 行政级别) in line with the bureaucratic personnel system of the central government. University presidents from a range of elite national research institutions, such as C9 universities, are officially ranked as an equivalent of governmental deputy minister-level (*fubuji* 副部级).⁴⁷ They do not possess the same level of administrative power in the government, but receive the same welfare benefits and conditions (*daiyu* 待遇) as a deputy minister, and can interact with other actors from a position of strength.

Furthermore, the university executives of leading institutions are regularly sent to the government to fill important positions in the political arena. According to a Beijing newspaper, for instance, since 2000, amongst the 116 Project 211 universities, 49 of their university presidents have taken a senior role in the party and government offices, military, academies for science and technology, the NPC, and the CPPCC after their tenure as university presidents. In some cases, they were promoted by the state to serve top executive roles in central ministries, such as ministers (Xinjingbao, 2014, 2015).⁴⁸ This career prospect seems to impact on the attitude and psychology of current government officials with whom university

⁴⁷ The national government's system of personnel hierarchy and administration ranks is extended to the personnel structure of universities. Presidents of China's top universities have formal ranks in the party-state hierarchy equivalent to vice-minister (vice-ministerial rank, *fubuji ganbu* 副部级干部). Presidents from the majority of other universities have a lower official administrative rank as an equivalence to governmental bureau-level (*tingji* 厅级).

⁴⁸ Some examples: In 2007, Professor Wan Gang, then President of Tongji University, was promoted to Minister of Science and Technology. Former leader of Beijing Aerospace University Du Yubo and former vice president of Beijing Normal University Liu Limin, for instance, were both appointed Deputy Ministers of Education in December 2010. In January 2015, Professor Hou Jianguo, President of University of Science and Technology China (USTC), was moved to the Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST) as its new Deputy Minister. In the same month, Professor Chen Jining, President of Tsinghua University, was promoted to Party Secretary of the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP).

executives interact (and also to affect university executives' behaviour in front of officials, which I will discuss later in the chapter). Government officials are known to show attention and respect to these university leaders who may become their superiors in the government in the future. This expedites the relationship building between universities and officials.

University leaders are well aware of the social status and personal influence attached to their academic, professional and bureaucratic roles. They take advantage of their capacity to influence officials and society to promote their universities' interests (I will discuss this in Chapters 4 and 5). A university vice president told me:

Although my official administrative rank as a vice president at my university is only equivalent to the governmental bureau-level (*zhengtingji* 正厅级), I am often treated as a much higher ranking official outside of the university, including at work and social settings ... This [respect and status for university executives] is very common in our Chinese culture ... This also explains why university leaders have easy access to high-level officials and policy decision-makers, and often gain their trust and support more easily.

Social networks

In addition to university leaders and academics, alumni networks also provide universities with significant social and political influence. Alumni networks are typically formed by university graduates, students and staff members, who share common identities and ties. As in many other countries, Chinese universities, especially the leading institutions, are cradles for the leaders of nearly every sector in the nation, including academia, business industries and the government. These alumni members construct a powerful social support base for their universities, and enhance their public relations, cultural and social power, and financial benefits (endowments) (W. Huang, Xie, & Qian, 2005, pp. 32-33; Wei, 2008, pp. 148-153; Xie, 2010, pp. 27-29; X. Yan, 2011, p. 312).

For example, Tsinghua is described by many interviewees as 'the most influential university in Chinese society' due to its alumni networks. The institution maintains strong relationships and bonds with its former students and staff through regular contacts and activities, and has developed a strong loyalty amongst them (S. Kang & Liu, 2005; C. Li, 1994; W. Lin, Zhang, Li, Liu, & Wang, 2005; Pan, 2007, p. 130). A vice president commented:

Tsinghua University is very influential and powerful in Chinese society thanks to its strong links with the successful alumni members. It has produced many graduates who became the elite from all walks of life and leaders of almost every sector in the nation. These graduates became Tsinghua University's stepping-stone to success, because it is

so easy for Tsinghua to receive support and get something done due to its great connections. The university has also paid a lot of attention to fostering Tsinghua culture and loyalty, strengthening these social networks, and maintaining close ‘family ties’ with its students and staff members.

Alumni networks play an important role in university–government relations, strengthening universities’ political influence and providing strategic advantages. Many government officials, for instance, actively foster their alumni ties in their professional roles at the central bureaucracy and continuously advance the interests of their alma maters through the policies they develop and support. This may result in political patronage of officials once they move to high-level positions. Even Chinese President Xi Jinping has maintained close ties with his alma mater Tsinghua University throughout his political career. During 2002–2003 when he was the governor of Zhejiang province, Xi actively included Tsinghua in Zhejiang’s regional development and investment initiatives. In October 2002, Xi signed a collaboration Memorandum of Understanding with Tsinghua on behalf of the Zhejiang government to strengthen their joint activities in economic industrial innovation and talents. In March–April 2003, Xi made a special visit to Tsinghua campus, and invested in a Zhejiang–Tsinghua research institute in Jiaxing city. As an alumnus, Xi provided government resources and policy support to Tsinghua, furthering its development and social influence. (I will further elaborate on university alumni networks in Chapter 5.)

Public activities

Meanwhile, some university leaders recognise the need for their institutions to increasingly integrate and engage with society and be publically accessible and valued. A university president stressed that there is still a lot to do in this regard:

Our main ties with society are through education and research, and through our daily interactions with students. The interactions between universities and communities are however far from sufficient. As a result, the media have carried negative reports and produced misunderstandings about universities’ roles, development goals and long-term values. There is much for universities to do to communicate with society, and improve public understanding, support and recognition of how universities advance the public interests and produce public goods.

In recent years, through the numerous university meetings I attended in China, I have noticed a growing engagement between universities and the media. Journalists and photographers are regularly invited to participate in university events and conferences, which are then followed by newspaper or online reports. Universities are keen to increase their public profile and

visibility, and to publicise their activities in the media. It has also become more common for journalists to interview university leaders and report on education-related issues, as a result of continuous public interest in education issues. A vice president told me that a good relationship with the media may support universities' interests and facilitate their influence and reputation in society.

It is worth noting that despite their growing media engagement and their community and social bases, Chinese universities carefully avoid involving media (as well as students and parents) in their policy advocacy activities and political interactions with the government. This is largely due to strict political constraints and possible negative consequences. Instead, universities devote particular attention and extensive efforts to building alliances with congenial officials behind the scenes, on which I will elaborate further in the following chapters.

Universities as political actors: feeling the 'policy zones'

So far in this chapter, I have shown how the leading research universities perceive their long-term missions and national roles, and how their social position is enhanced by various factors and strategies, ranging from cultural and historical influence, to the peculiar alignment of their own administrative structure with that of the central bureaucracy. Autonomy and academic freedom are understood as intrinsic values and principles of a modern university, and a precondition for a university to fulfil its role and responsibilities toward society (Thorens, 2006; Junzong Zhang, 2004). China's national research universities, even the most influential ones, still endure inadequate institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and are subject to strict state controls. How does university leadership understand the crucial constraints in the policy environment that hinder their institutions' long-term development and scholarly nature, and how do they perceive their capacity to negotiate various entitlements and influence different policies?

I have had the opportunity to attend a large number of meetings between Australian and Chinese universities. Discussion about academic and research collaborations often led to comparisons of national education policies, particularly on university autonomy, between the two countries. At one meeting in December 2014, for example, a Chinese university representative pointed out that the Chinese government had the discretion to alter or abolish any academic program offered by a university at any time. Australian universities' representatives suggested that this would be unthinkable in Australia as their universities had the right to select and determine subjects without the government's interferences. In such settings, executives from Chinese national universities often openly express their frustration about the over-regulation of the education sector by the Chinese government.

Before detailing the key policy challenges, it is important for me to point out one salient governance strategy of the Chinese government in the higher education sector. The state manages universities of different tiers with a so-called ‘stratified’ or ‘hierarchical approach’ (*fenceng duidai* 分层对待). This means that, comparatively, the elite national research universities enjoy greater institutional autonomy and a higher level of funding than lower-ranking tertiary institutions (Jupeng Yang & Su, 2012). Such a differentiated approach is documented in the National Outline for Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020) announced in 2010 (CPCCC & State Council, 2010). Under the government guidelines, a small number of selected leading universities are offered a greater autonomy and additional funding for improving their academic management.

There are a range of reasons for this approach. These prestigious universities are generally considered by the state as low-risk, reliable and mature. They are also highly proactive in lobbying the government and seeking more autonomy and policy flexibility. Additionally, the government becomes aware that the top-tier players should be given a greater autonomy in certain areas, so that they can strengthen their growth and capacities, and better serve their role assigned by the Chinese leaders in the nation-building projects. A university vice president suggested:

Building world-class universities in China has been a national development strategy, reflecting Chinese leaders’ directives and guiding the government’s actions. Therefore, the central government has decided to provide special support to a small number of leading national universities, including some Project 985 recipients, in various policy areas, because they are in the best position to become world-class ... Such support includes more generous funding and some more flexible regulations.

The elite Project 985 universities, for example, enjoy more autonomy for independent institutional reforms and local policy experiments within the campus than the non-985 universities, such as establishing new research departments and undergraduate programs,⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Many universities are required to go through an evaluation and approval process with the government to set up and establish new undergraduate programs, but the leading institutions can now establish them independently (*xuweidian ziwo shenpi* 学位点自我审批) as long as they notify the MoE and register them for the record (*bei’an* 备案).

the self-awarding of senior professional titles,⁵⁰ and undertaking research training reforms.⁵¹ As mentioned earlier, the leading universities' executives also receive higher official ranks. In contrast, the non-985 universities' applications for new academic programs and local reforms are subject to strict regulation and scrutiny by the state. This is largely because the state attempts to control their quality and practices to reduce the risks of mishaps and chaos in the sector.

Despite such a 'stratified approach' that can guarantee some privileged access to funding and more flexible regulations, not all policy areas are the same. Even the most innovative Chinese universities remain heavily influenced by the MoE policies and edicts. Institutional operational and academic areas, such as the appointment of university leaderships, the conferral of academic degrees and student admissions, are still centrally controlled and involve minimal consultations.

What issues do universities contest? How do they know what issues they are allowed to challenge and what remain off limits? Through interviews, I have identified three 'policy zones' characterised by different levels of autonomy, including a 'no-go zone', a 'contention zone' and an 'autonomous zone'. It has become apparent to me that certain 'policy zones' allow for more autonomy and universities' intervention than others depending on the level of political risks and potential for social chaos and instability. Universities' interactions with the government are shaped by a clear perception of what is allowed and what is not, by the urgency of the issues and the potential threat of action. The leading research universities feel that the 'contention zone' requires intense negotiation and proactive actions with the government, if it is not to endanger their operational activities and long-term missions.

'No-go zone': unchallengeable principles

A set of policies and principles that relate to the leadership, ideology and the legitimacy of party authority are not up for discussion. I include these policy issues in the 'no-go zone'. They include the central appointment of university executives, the 'cadres under party supervision' system, and political education. They are the principles that affirm the ultimate leadership and control of the party-state over universities. University executives and staff unanimously avoid

⁵⁰ At regular universities, senior professional titles of academic staff, such as professors and associate professors, have to be officially assessed and granted by the government, but a small number of leading universities are authorised to decide and award the titles for their own staff within their institutions.

⁵¹ Doctoral supervision at most universities, for instance, needs to be approved by the government through central examination and assessment, but the elite institutions can approve it 'in house'.

challenging these structural rules, admitting that these are too sensitive and difficult to change.

Appointment and removal of university leaders

University presidents and party secretaries of national research universities are decided upon and appointed by the Central Organization Department of the CPC Committee. Other senior executives, such as vice presidents, are also centrally managed and supervised by the MoE and/or the sponsoring ministries. University leaders are regularly audited on personal income and overseas travel, and are subject to performance reviews and a promotion process by the government. As Richard McGregor points out, 'the party's control over personnel was at the heart of its ability to overhaul state companies, without losing leverage over them at the same time' (McGregor, 2010, p. 69). In the higher education sector, the party strengthens its control over universities through its control over university leaders' careers (Pan, 2007, p. 140).

As a result of the government's discretion and opaqueness on the appointment and removal process, the turnovers and tenures of presidents and party secretaries are unpredictable and irregular, often linked to the power struggle within the party rather than proper standards and rules (Leung & Sharma, 2015). In 2013–2015, for instance, several leading Chinese universities' presidents were changed or transferred, following the change in national leadership and the Communist Party's directives to crack down on corruption. In October 2014, the government removed Fudan President Yang Yuliang in response to public criticism about a research fund scandal in which Yang was however not directly involved. Yang was a highly popular and respected public figure who was likely to serve a second term, yet the government claimed that he needed to 'retire'. In January 2015, Tsinghua President Chen Jining who headed the university for only three years was appointed as a party head of a central ministry. In February 2015, the government removed PKU President Wang Enge after serving only two years, and transferred Zhejiang University (ZJU) President Lin Jianhua to lead PKU. Lin had only started his position as ZJU President in 2013. Other key universities such as Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJTU), Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT), and University of Science and Technology China (USTC) all experienced similar movements of university leaderships during the same period.

Sudden announcements and swift changes in the university leaderships have often taken university faculty by surprise, causing disruptions to universities' operations. In early 2013, for example, ZJU President Yang Wei was promoted to Director of the Chinese National Science Foundation, but the government could not decide on his replacement until several months later. According to ZJU staff, the university was left in a state of near chaos, with no leadership or direction.

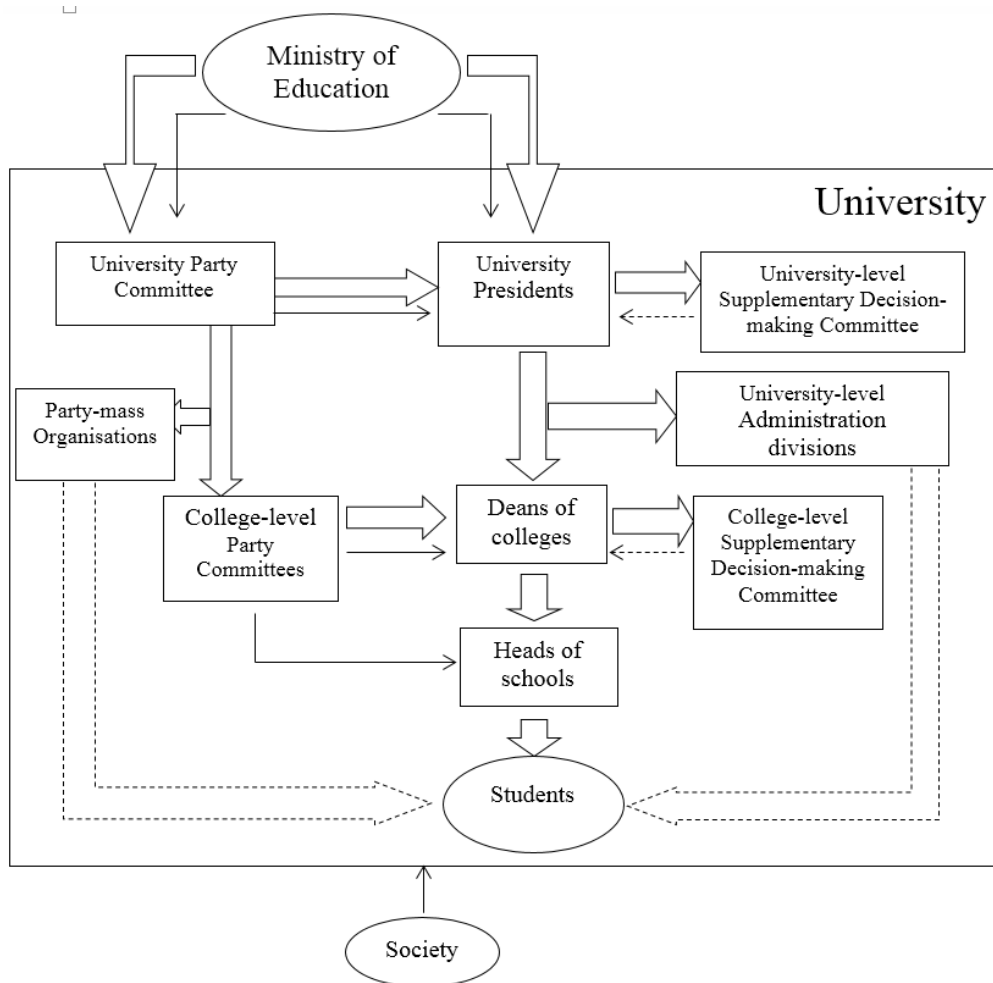
Notably, in 2011, the MoE initiated a minor reform on the university presidential appointment system and conducted an experiment in several universities that openly recruited their presidents. Since then, five institutions have used an ‘open’ recruitment process to select presidents, where a committee was formed to choose candidates, and the candidates were evaluated using a number of criteria, including interviews and public opinion polls. However, none of the top universities in China has been involved in this experiment (T. Sun, 2013). Many interviewees sneered at this ‘reform’ and suggested that the central appointment of university leaderships will remain without any substantial modifications, as this policy is ‘a critical tool for the party-state to lead and control universities’.

Party leadership

‘Party leadership’ is a fundamental principle, not an option, in the operations of universities (Fan 2008). Universities in receipt of government funds must follow the fundamental principles of ‘president accountability system under the leadership of the party committee’ and ‘cadres under party supervision’.⁵² The first principle refers to a university governance and management system (see Diagram 2.1) that is led by a party committee to whom the president reports. This party committee has a party secretary who generally doubles as chairman of the university council and supervises the university president on significant matters as the de facto leader of the university. The second principle is closely related to the first one, meaning that all university cadres (e.g., senior executives and mid-level personnel) are subject to the party committee’s guidance and supervision. No anti-party, anti-government behaviour is tolerated. The aim of these principles is to ensure that the party leads universities effectively, and that universities remain loyal to the party and the socialist system.

Diagram 2.1. Governance within a Chinese national university (Xi, Li, & Guo, 2005)

⁵² As noted in Chapter 1, the ‘party management of cadres’ (*dang guan ganbu* 党管干部) or *nomenklatura* system is one of the CPC’S most powerful and effective instruments of control over the key positions throughout the bureaucratic system, as well as throughout the party’s own hierarchy, and the Organization Department of the CPCCC is its very top organ. This system consists of lists of leading positions, over which party units exercise the power to make appointments and dismissals; lists of reserves or candidates for these positions; and institutions and processes for making the appropriate personnel changes. It gives the CPC a dominant say over personnel decisions of all important positions, including university presidents and party secretaries.



- ⇒ Direct leadership
- Direct supervision
- ⇔ Service provision
- ▶ Information provision

The two principles facilitate the party, through its powerful party committee, to monitor and intervene in universities' operations at multi-dimensional levels. The university executives explained to me that the party committee manages 'anything related to the political ideology and political institution' within a university, and has the authority to approve operational and personnel matters such as the appointment of the heads of university administrative divisions (*chuzhang* 处长). The only exceptions are some major academic issues, such as the management of academic programs, colleges and professorships. These issues may be discussed and decided at the President's Office Meetings (*xiaozhang bangonghui* 校长办公会)

or the University Academic Committee (*xueshu weiyuanhui* 学术委员会) without seeking the party's approval.⁵³

Party education and political studies

The state also dictates compulsory courses on the ideology of the socialist system, and controls the political education components of universities' curriculum. Such courses are intended to safeguard the political loyalty of the university staff and students to the Communist Party. Within a three-year academic program, a total of four such political education courses are required, or about 9.3 percent of a normal three-year bachelor's degree program. This is still an improvement over pre-2005 requirements that dictated eight mandatory courses (Douglass, 2012, p. 656).

In addition, my interviewees observed that certain sensitive areas of political research, such as Chinese politics, still remain monitored and restricted by the government and cannot be freely discussed. This presents an ironic contrast to the fact that the government is pouring increasing funding resources into developing social sciences, because they provide valuable analysis and solutions to social problems.

In December 2014, President Xi Jinping, the State Council and the General Office of the CPCPC issued a directive to further reinforce the propaganda and teaching of Marxism, Leninism and Chinese socialism in universities for stronger 'party leadership and ideological guidance' (Jing Li, 2015). In March 2015, Liu Yunshan, a Standing Committee member of the Political Bureau of the CPCPC, addressed a meeting with party chiefs and the presidents of 12 universities, where he urged universities to strengthen the education of socialism with Chinese characteristics on campus (S. Tian, 2015). It indicates that the Communist Party leadership is further tightening the political education policy to ensure that universities promote the party's ideology.

Universities treading lightly in the no-go zone

When discussing the 'no-go zone', university executives I interviewed have generally displayed two different attitudes. The first one is 'complete understanding and deference'. A university president, for instance, explained to me that in his view the party leadership did not conflict with his university's autonomy. He said:

⁵³ Another policy relating to the party leadership is the drafting of individual university constitutions (*daxue zhangcheng* 大学章程). It serves as a customised compact that lists the operational guidelines and autonomy of a university, and is drafted by individual universities but strictly scrutinised by the government for approval. Some university executives I spoke to perceive it as a way for the government to ensure that a university complies with the ruling of the party and the government.

Some people are critical about the party leadership over universities, especially the 'president accountability system under the leadership of the party committee'. They describe the system as 'the person in charge [party secretary] is not accountable, and the accountable person [university president] is not in charge (*lingdaode bu fuze, fuzede bu lingdao* 领导的不负责, 负责的不领导)'. They claim that the party interferes with universities' business too much, and that the party leadership should be removed from universities for the sake of 'protecting academic autonomy' ... Their analysis is based on a misunderstanding and confusion about the Chinese political context and the relationship between the party and universities. To begin with, China is a socialist country led by the Communist Party. Party leadership is a fundamental principle of university administrations, which should not be confused with the institutional autonomy of universities. In terms of a university's operations and management, we [universities] can still decide on some important matters at the University Council (*xiaodonghui* 校董会) like American private universities. China can develop world-class universities without having to adopt the university governance system of foreign countries. Evidently, Chinese universities have developed rapidly in recent years.

University leaderships' political orientation and discourses are influenced and monitored by the state, and their careers are determined by the state too, so it is no surprise that university leaders align closely with party priorities. They are required to maintain deference and loyalty when discussing the party or their political positions. As Pan points out, to pave the way for their future political careers, university presidents need to accommodate political trends and ideologies and perform well in implementing the university's political tasks (Pan, 2007, p. 137).

Yet, the majority of university leaders hold, at least privately, a different view. The second attitude—'discontent, compromise and avoidance'—was more common amongst my university interviewees. During our private conversations, they frowned, expressed scepticism and frustration about these rigid political rules. They agreed that 'party leadership' restricts institutional autonomy and academic freedom in numerous ways. Yet, they also seemed to have accustomed themselves to the reality and understood the negative consequences if they challenge the rules. They have generally adopted a compromising and avoidance approach, burying their personal scepticism in public, at work and at official settings. They share a common view that in order to survive and grow, national universities have no other options but to 'build a tacit understanding and agreement and develop a positive relationship with the central government'.

In particular, university leaders have maintained a clear perception of what is allowed and what is not, and adapted to policy issues carrying different levels of political risk. A university executive pointed out:

We [universities] know what subjects are open for discussion—we know what can be discussed, and what cannot. Universities can always interact with the government on policies, as long as the fundamental party leadership and political issues, such as the central appointment of university leaders, remain untouched, because they are not up for negotiation or consultation. Many other policy issues related to university operations or government process are open for intervention and are subject to influence.

Despite different private attitudes and convictions, the outcome is the same: universities surrender to the absolute leadership and authority of the party, abide by its fundamental political principles, and do not contest in the ‘no-go zone’.

Interestingly, there is also an informal element to the university–government interactions in the rigid and sensitive ‘no-go zone’. Instead of challenging these rules, some elite university executives take advantage of them and play their cards to advance their institutions’ interests. For example, university leaders employ the ‘central appointment of university leadership’ to facilitate flows of policy information with Beijing and enhance their universities’ political influence and personal connections with the state powers (see Chapters 4 and 5).

‘Contention zone’: key constraints and conflicts

The ‘contention zone’ refers to a range of rigid central policies that are applied to all national universities in various key academic and operational areas. Examples include student admissions and the conferral of academic degrees. Decisions in these areas are regarded as prerogatives and entitlements of autonomous universities, but are subject, in China, to intrusive intervention and strict central regulation. Essentially, policies in the ‘contention zone’ are intended to strengthen the state’s political control over education, maintain social stability, and force universities to deliver on nation-building priorities and goals. The ‘contention zone’ policies inevitably clash with the scholarly nature, interests and strategies of national research universities, and threaten their academic activities, institutional operations and long-term missions. The universities envisage that intense negotiations with the state on these issues are required to seek practical solutions, protect their rights, and advance their interests.

Student admissions

University student admissions are tightly regulated by the state. The central student admissions policy is widely regarded as ‘highly political’ and ‘socially sensitive’ in nature,

because it affects a large number of Chinese citizens,⁵⁴ and has significant implications for social equity and political stability. The policy contains two major aspects: student admission quotas (*zhaosheng jihua bianzhi* 招生计划编制) and student selection methods (*kaoshi luqu fangshi* 考试录取方式).

Firstly, each year the MoE determines the student admission quotas and numbers for individual national universities and defines their student recruitment ratios for different geographical regions and provinces. This is especially true of undergraduate recruitments. For instance, the MoE specifies the 'geographic priorities' from where a university has to recruit more undergraduate students each year, and provides detailed instructions on the percentage increase for middle and western regions in China and the percentage reduction for coastal provinces. Universities must comply with these rules precisely. In recent years, the national recruitment policy for postgraduate students has been increasingly relaxed, however, research universities remain subject to tight central regulation over postgraduate admission numbers, including PhD students.

The government claims that such a central mechanism 'improves China's social and economic equity', 'ensures an equal access of disadvantaged, remote regions to universities', and 'regulates universities' practices, sizes and quality'.⁵⁵ In early 2013, for example, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang issued a new directive and commanded national universities to recruit additional 30,000 undergraduate students from the less-developed middle and western regions in the same year. The rationale was to 'help improve social equity and regional economic development'. Following Li's decision, the government immediately altered the details of universities' 2013 admission quotas only a few months prior to the national university entrance exam. Such episodes reoccur regularly.

My interviewees were clearly disgruntled about their lack of autonomy in student admissions. They consistently argued that this policy has hindered their selection of quality candidates,

⁵⁴ Due to the large scale of the Chinese higher education system, this policy involves a huge number of Chinese citizens. Based on the MoE statistics in December 2014, for example, China had 1,793,953 postgraduate students and 24,680,726 undergraduates enrolled at a regular higher education institution in 2013 (MoE, 2014f).

⁵⁵ According to some officials I spoke to, by regulating university admissions and manipulating student numbers and ratios, the state aims to 'optimise mobility flows within the country', 'narrow gaps in wealthy and poor regions', 'look after the people from poor regions and with disadvantaged low socio-economic backgrounds', and ensure 'an equal access to top level universities'. In addition, national universities receive regular funding from the MoE partially based on their student enrolments, so some institutions may recruit a large number of students beyond their capacity for the sake of financial revenue. Therefore, it is necessary for the government to regulate their student numbers and ensure their academic quality.

limited student numbers and affected their sustainable growth. A senior university executive commented:

The quality and quantity of undergraduate and postgraduate students are vital for the development of research universities with world-class vision and mission, especially PhD students. An important task for research universities is to select and train talents. Due to the tight restrictions on student recruitment quotas and capped funding for each student place, the number of our quality PhD students is woefully inadequate. This will have significant impact on our long-term growth. The government does not understand or care how much research universities depend on their talents and young students. It cares more about political stability and savings [of university student funding].

Secondly, the MoE defines student selection methods and conducts unified national exams for university admissions, especially at the undergraduate level, despite the substantial disparities in education quality and capacity between different regions and institutions. For undergraduate student selection, the MoE mandates *gaokao* (高考), the national university entrance examination system. For postgraduate recruitments, student candidates must sit the national entrance exams before taking individual universities' oral and written tests. Leading research universities have gradually gained more autonomy to handpick their PhD candidates, but they are still subject to the state allocations of student enrolment quotas, as mentioned previously.

In particular, *gaokao* has become a focal point in Chinese society and in the education sector due to its unique social role and its one-size-fits-all approach. It is not only a unified, standard exam for universities to select and recruit students. It is also a symbol for equal, open access to opportunities and fairness for all socio-economic backgrounds, which is similar to the role of the Chinese imperial examination system. As it affects the interests of a large number of citizens and families, it is commonly understood that any major changes related to *gaokao* can potentially lead to widespread public discontent and social instability.⁵⁶ Hence, the government tightly controls this policy area to prevent risks and negative consequences.

Notably, since 2003, the MoE has conducted a small reform trial for some leading universities to select and admit undergraduate students more autonomously (*zizhu xuanba luqu gaige shidian* 自主选拔录取改革试点) (MoE, 2013a). Students still need to sit the *gaokao* but are

⁵⁶ For example, one university director in charge of student admissions shared with me his understanding. He explained that Chinese society is full of various *guanxi* factors. A few universities 'went a little too far', and made some unethical decisions (nepotism and corruption) on student admissions that caused a big stir. Following this, the MoE decided to strengthen its regulatory power and specifications about student selection.

also tested by individual universities. Some of these universities started to collaborate on joint student testing and selection. However, students selected and recruited under the ‘autonomous selection’ policy cannot exceed 5% of each university’s total student recruitment quota. Most university students are still admitted through *gaokao*. In addition, since late September 2014, the State Council has tightened up the rules regarding the autonomous student recruitment trial and suspended all self-initiated university coalitions for joint student testing and admissions (State Council, 2014; Guo Zhang, 2014; Zhe Zhang, Zheng, Wang, & Xing, 2010),⁵⁷ because their collective policy ideas and activities have allegedly undermined the order of national student admissions and led to conflicts and chaos in the sector.

The leading research universities I interviewed have strongly criticised the various student recruitment policy constraints and the state’s political motives and pressures. They have maintained the view that it is in the universities’ right to follow academic principles, values and priorities, and choose their own quality students for education and research (independent of where they are from), and that this practice ultimately supports their world-class development and long-term missions. A university director for student recruitment explained how *gaokao* has failed the Chinese research universities:

The centralised *gaokao* contains fundamental flaws and limitations. It has constantly failed in judging students’ true potential, motivation and talent ... The Chinese higher education sector is highly diverse, with various types and different levels of institutions, from a few first-class research universities to many specialised and professional training institutions. One single unified exam paper is extremely inadequate, ineffective and unscientific in distinguishing the different levels, qualities, skillsets and types of students. The universal, one-size-fits-all approach goes against our academic values and principles. It does not work for our leading research universities. It is damaging our development.

Another university vice president commented:

As a leading research university, we aim to train our students to become leaders in various fields and play important roles in society. However, currently, many students selected solely based on the national unified exams are ‘exam machines’ who lack personal drive, desirable qualities, and general skills. We should be allowed to select real talents who can truly meet our own criteria and can be trained as future leaders.

⁵⁷ These coalitions include ‘*Beiyue*’ (北约), ‘*Huayue*’ (华约) and ‘*Zhuoyue*’ (卓越) (Zhe Zhang et al., 2010). For their latest development, see *China Youth Daily*, 29 November 2014 (Guo Zhang, 2014).

Funding

Despite increased economic opportunities and financial investment in the higher education sector, many university leaders I interviewed have described university funding policy as a 'key constraint' and 'the topmost autonomy issue'. National research universities are heavily dependent on government funding. For example, a vice president from a science-intensive university told me that 90% of his university's annual research funding comes from the government. He added, 'So to speak, government funding policies determine our life and death. No money, no development. Funding policy is vital for our universities' growth and competitiveness.' However, a flawed central university funding system is seen as having severely restrained autonomy and development.

Worthwhile research requires long-term support. Although some central departments have become increasingly aware that investment in universities requires a long-term, comprehensive strategy, the Chinese government in general maintains a 'planned economy' approach. Instead of emphasising consistent, sustainable block funding (*baozhangxing jingfei* 保障性经费) for universities to use with reasonable autonomy,⁵⁸ the state channels its large funding through short-term, temporary 'special projects' or 'programs' (*zhuanxiang* 专项), which have specific deliverables and deadlines. The goal is to direct universities' activities to carry out nation-building priorities and tasks.⁵⁹ Examples of such special projects include Project 985, Program 863⁶⁰ and the 2011 Scheme.⁶¹

Special programs have a temporary and unstable nature. The discontinuity or a major adjustment to funding programs and policies can lead to significant consequences for universities which heavily depend on these revenues. Universities feel financially insecure about their future directions. For example, Project 985 has become one of the most important funding sources for leading national research universities, and is regarded as their 'source of basic living allowance'. A number of university presidents I spoke to were deeply worried

⁵⁸ Regular block funding is a type of recurring funds calculated by a formula based on enrolments and staff (Wang C. 2000; Hua 2002) with budgetary allocations from the Ministry of Finance through the Ministry of Education and other sponsoring Ministries.

⁵⁹ For some national universities, the programme funding has accounted for over 50% of budgetary allocation.

⁶⁰ With the endorsement of Deng Xiaoping, a 'High technology research and development plan' or 'Program 863' (*gaojishu yanjiu fazhan jihua* 高技术研究发展计划) was launched in November 1986 (MoST, 2010b). See more information on the official website of the Project 863: <http://www.863.gov.cn/1/1/index.htm>.

⁶¹ For example, the design of the 2011 program to a large extent reflected the government's instrumentalism and top-down approach. The government framed some themes and prioritised areas, and with the control power of funding, it channelled universities and their research into national short/mid-term socio-economic development needs rather than encouraging them to undertake free knowledge exploration and discoveries.

about the uncertainty of the future development of Project 985. They suggested that if the government cancels or overhauls the special program, it will severely affect their universities' current operations and future development plans. A university executive commented:

The government wants to see investment returns as soon as possible, so it likes project-based funding. However, these type of government projects exist today, and may not exist tomorrow, especially when the state leaders and the directives change. Instability and insecurity have a huge impact on our universities.

In addition, university activities are required to meet the government's development priorities. Government bodies specify the scope of research they intend to support and monitor the quality and timeline of the work. This puts research universities in danger of losing sight of their deep mission, scholarly nature and capabilities, which make them unique participants in national innovation systems and major contributors to national wellbeing (Brodhead, 2014). To be allocated funding from these special programs, many research universities have to divert energy from more productive and sustainable strategies. They pay more attention to competing for such resources than to their scholarly works, and constantly adjust their research priorities and orientations to meet the official selection criteria.⁶² For example, as Ma observed, the government expects their invested research projects to have immediate outputs, which has resulted in increased pressure on basic science researchers (W. Ma, 2003, p. 17).

A university president explained the conflicting priorities between the research universities and the government on such funding policy:

The government manipulates our universities to follow its ideas and plans through its funding policy. We have spent too much time meeting their needs, chasing their money, adapting ourselves to those government programs. We do need the money. I have to visit the central ministries every week to lobby for such funding ... In my view, the government should distribute most of the funding in a consistent, sustainable manner that allows universities to develop more freely towards our own goals and priorities.

Last but not least, Chinese universities are subject to rigid spending rules and financial audits for government funds. In particular, the lack of financial discretion has created a significant gap between need and supply (Y. Kang, 2013). For example, Project 985 provides significant university development funds, but universities are only allowed to spend the money on

⁶² Furthermore, the overly frequent quality assessments and financial audits of those special projects also become a big administrative burden for universities, which are not only repetitive and time-consuming, but also intrusive, interfering and forceful. Universities feel overwhelmed but still have to take a part in them.

specified areas such as laboratory equipment.⁶³ Similarly, many government research funds adopt a ‘partial funding system’, which does not cover overheads and staffing costs. It is often the case that the more research projects a university receives, the more money it must find from somewhere else to cross-subsidise.

With special programs quickly accumulating over time, the universities find it is increasingly challenging to sustain their academic activities and ongoing operations. A university research executive concluded:

As research universities, we have the original, ultimate roles and missions of free exploration, fundamental research and innovation, and talent training. We should be allowed and supported for undertaking these beneficial activities autonomously. However, our government controls the university funding and commands where the money can be used. This is very unhealthy, damaging the academic nature of research universities. It is time to return to the original point and allow research universities to fulfil their roles.

Facing funding constraints, the research universities have increasingly engaged in negotiation with the government. They have filed complaints and petitions to the government, and advocated a sustainable funding system, a long-term investment commitment, and a greater autonomy in financial matters. For instance, C9 universities persistently lobbied the state on the continuation of Project 985 and on the improvement of its spending rules. The government later extended the funding rounds of the project and lifted some of the spending restrictions (see Chapter 3). As a C9 university president claimed, ‘The strength and wellbeing of Chinese research universities is critical to national innovation. We [universities] should be allowed to develop more freely. We need to have sufficient space and resources to focus on our long-term efforts without the current policy constraints and interferences.’

Academic degrees and assessments

The central bureaucracy is directly involved in university academic activities. It tightly controls the accreditation and awarding of academic degrees, regulates university academic programs, and conducts frequent academic audits and reviews. The official justification of such involvement is to maintain order and prevent misconduct such as counterfeit degrees, academic corruption and fraud that may be causes of ‘social chaos’ (*luan 乱*). The most prestigious research universities are not shielded from these rigid regulations and mandatory

⁶³ This is called ‘*zhiding yongtu, zhuan kuan zhuanyong*’ (指定用途, 专款专用).

procedures, despite their highest standards of practice in the sector and their reputation. Here below, I will focus on the awarding of degrees and the system of quality evaluation.

To begin with, Chinese universities are not self-accrediting institutions. The MoE centrally accredits all university academic degrees, regulates student enrolments and registrations, and determines the national academic qualifications framework. Under this rigid system, universities are subject to the MoE's approval for any major degree-related matters. There is very little flexibility.

A top research university E, for instance, lodged a formal application to the MoE, seeking permission to offer its undergraduate students a 'diploma certificate'. This certificate would only be issued when students had completed a certain amount of credits but could not complete their full bachelor degrees due to special circumstances. The MoE bluntly objected to E's proposal. It claimed that according to the national policy, research universities like E were only allowed to offer academic degrees equivalent to or above a four-year bachelor degree (*benke zhidao yuanxiao* 本科指导院校). The ministry concluded that it was unable to 'break the rule' just for E. Despite repeated negotiation, E was unable to change the MoE's decision. As a result, E issued a symbolic, 'self-recognised' diploma certificate to its students as an alternative solution.

In addition, the state imposes a 'one person—one degree—one certificate—one stamp' policy which applies to all university academic degrees. The MoE issues each qualified student one academic degree certificate at a time; each Chinese degree certificate has to be authenticated by the state with an official MoE stamp; and the format and content of the degree certificates are decided by the MoE, which accommodates only one stamp. This creates problems when Chinese universities intend to offer students double degrees (two degrees validated by one stamp on a single certificate), or develop combined degrees with other institutions (one degree with two or more stamps on a single certificate).

For instance, a research university N successfully reformed its teaching curriculum and sought to offer double degrees to its undergraduate students who had successfully completed all academic credits for both degree programs. The MoE objected to N's proposal saying that the government would only approve one degree with one stamp for each student on graduation. The MoE reminded N that 'this is the rule that everyone has to abide by'. In the end, N decided to design and 'self-accredit' its own double degree certificate to award its qualified students,

which was only recognised by N. A number of universities have taken a similar approach and counter-measures within their institutions.⁶⁴

Furthermore, the central bureaucracy conducts regular academic quality audits, assessments and performance rankings on national universities, with a goal to 'ensure quality', and to make them more accountable for the results they achieve with the resources allocated to them. As 'an outsider of academia', it measures university performance and quality 'based merely on the number of articles they have published and the number of times the articles get cited' (Gan, 2015). The MoE has also instituted specific guidelines on the evaluation of faculty, attempting to install a merit-based process of faculty advancement that takes into account research productivity, which is tied to the numerical counting of articles, for example, in MoE-selected journals. My interviewees explained to me that the central government recently adjusted some of the evaluation indicators based on universities' policy suggestions, but it was only a superficial improvement, and did not change the nature of the exercise. This has driven universities to focus more on boosting their results in specific government measurements than on other academic activities.

The frequent audits and assessments by the MoE and their central sponsoring agencies also create significant administrative burdens in the national research universities' operations and resources. A university director pointed out:

Tens of academic fields and disciplines. A round after another ... They require a lot of labour, money, effort and time from each university to prepare, organise and receive the inspections of the government's evaluation teams. It is very time-consuming, energy draining, and counterproductive.

The government's enduring administrative interference has also been displayed in other university academic affairs. For instance, research universities are still required to submit their education and research training reform plans to the MoE for individual assessment and approval,⁶⁵ which should be universities' own academic decision. The MoE can exercise its

⁶⁴ Besides, this academic degree policy also restricts Chinese universities from collaborating with their foreign partners for combined degrees. There are only two exceptions in China: Tsinghua and PKU successfully sought special policy exemptions from the State Council (as a pilot trial) to validate some of their combined degrees with their international partners (i.e. one degree with two or more stamps on each certificate). The two universities told me that their negotiation with the government for this special permission was a 'rather lengthy and complex process'.

⁶⁵ For example, according to a number of deans of graduate school at a university meeting in 2014, the MoE requested first-class universities to submit comprehensive plans for their own postgraduate education reform plan and self-evaluation review papers by March 2015, with detailed information including student recruitment,

administrative power to suspend or abolish any university academic programs in the country. Many university courses must also use a single approved textbook that heavily influences course content—an intrusion of control over the curriculum not tolerated in universities elsewhere in the world (Douglass, 2012, p. 657).

My interviewees shared their grievances and frustration with me, and outlined how these policies have severely constrained the research universities' academic freedom and operations, created administrative burdens, and hindered their international academic collaboration. A university executive commented:

Even at key Project 985 universities, institutional operations are largely controlled by the MoE, including student recruitment, academic programs, and even graduation [degree awarding] ... In reality, China has only one 'university' and that is the 'MoE University'. All Chinese universities are a de facto branch or sub-campus of the 'MoE University', as we all have to abide by its rules. If the MoE did not exist, China would have already had world-class universities!

Another lamented:

The central government should leave these academic matters to our own business and decisions, as we will do everything possible to ensure our quality and competitiveness ... Those policy rules are designed for third-tier or 'high-risk' institutions which do require close monitoring, effective regulation and quality control. Yet they [rules] are redundant and restrictive for the leading national research universities, which strive to excel and perform at world-class level and have sound self-discipline and quality assurance mechanisms in place ... Our universities are so constrained and suffocated. We deserve more autonomy on these matters.

It becomes clear that the 'contention zone' is where the different interests and priorities of national research universities and the state compete. On student recruitment policies, for example, universities' priority is 'meritocracy', while the government's priority is 'social equity and political stability'. The government uses universities to achieve its own priorities but ignores universities' needs. As Tsang suggests, conflicts in perspective for national development and for education will likely persist in China, as they will in other countries. What is really at issue is whether or not there are institutionalised structures and processes for

academic disciplines, programs, quality measures, degree conferring, and international experience for students. The MoE claimed that the aim of this exercise was to 'evaluate, approve and ensure high quality of their degree programs'. This attracted criticism from universities.

managing such conflicts in ways that appropriately balance and accommodate legitimate diverse interests (Tsang, 2000, pp. 610-618).

To resolve these issues and seek more autonomy in the contention zone, the leading research universities have deepened their interactions with the government on policies and developed a range of lobbying strategies, such as testing the water by breaking rules, coordinating actions, mobilising personal connections, and undertaking policy innovation and experiments. (I will elaborate on such strategies in the later chapters of the thesis.)

‘Autonomous zone’: low-risk local affairs

The Chinese government has opened up a range of national policy areas, allowing leading research institutions to manage their internal affairs with reasonable autonomy. I call this open policy space as the ‘autonomous zone’. In contrast to the rigid ‘no-go zone’ and ‘contention zone’ policies, which are associated with political risks and social instability, the ‘autonomous zone’ generally contains localised and soft-natured issues that are technical, non-political, and only affect small numbers of people.

As explained earlier, the state manages universities of different tiers with a so-called ‘stratified approach’ in a range of policy areas where elite national universities receive a greater institutional autonomy and preferential treatment than institutions of lower ranking. These policy matters largely belong to the ‘autonomous zone’. Examples include the restructuring of university schools, the development of a university’s general curriculums, the establishment of new science research departments, the self-awarding of senior professional titles, and the institutional teaching and research training methods.

Research training, for instance, is a relatively flexible and autonomous area with a high level of academic and technical details. In the past, universities had to go through a complex application process with many bureaucratic procedures if they intended to establish a new university postgraduate program. The bureaucratic procedures included government assessment, authorisation, and reporting. In recent years, the government has gradually simplified and decentralised the program approval system. Especially, the prestigious research universities have begun to enjoy a streamlined self-approval process for establishing new academic degree programs within their institutions, and a greater autonomy to decide on how to train their research students effectively.

In the ‘autonomous zone’, university executives are in high spirits and feel encouraged and energised to innovate their practices and experiment new initiatives. Their efforts often inspire other institutions and government officials. Such a development of the ‘autonomous zone’ is partially a result of the government’s awareness of the elite institutions’ existing capacity and

their development needs for a more supportive policy environment. It is also partially due to these universities' persistent negotiations and lobbying on these policy issues.

Concluding remarks

Chinese research universities' self-perception remains at the core of their motivations and actions. They see themselves as leaders, places for cutting-edge thought and debate, but subject to local cultural and political norms. The leading research universities have developed mixed perceptions of their identity, roles and rights: one defined and driven by their academic work, long-term missions for knowledge discovery, the public interest of education, and their international partnerships; the other shaped and framed by their organic relationship with the government, on which they remain dependent.

Sitting on the fence between the state and society, closely involved in both, Chinese research universities are a unique type of agent in the nation. Being repositories of knowledge, they are significant and influential organisations with a special set of social, cultural, economic and political attributes and functions, and increasingly insert themselves in the global imaginary about research and education. The academic nature of universities guides their operations, strategies and behaviour and determines how they relate to and interact with the government and society (Zijie Huang & Cheng, 2010, pp. 190-192; Junzong Zhang, 2004, pp. 8-9).

As operators and members of a community of higher learning, the universities perceive their activities, including knowledge exploration, promotion of education, and the advancement and application of technology, as the provision of public goods, in the service of the public interest, and as long-term contributions to society. University leaders, despite being appointed by the government, generally maintain principled views of the rights and moral entitlements of modern research institutions, empowered by sufficient institutional autonomy and abundant public funding. These awareness, expectations and claims become more intense as they engage in significant internationalisation and witness the autonomy and rights enjoyed by their foreign peers, partners and competitors.

In the policy environment of higher education, I identified three 'zones' characterised by different levels of autonomy: a non-negotiable 'no-go zone' ('fundamental' issues where the power of the government is unchallengeable, for instance, party leadership and central appointment and removal of university president); a localised, low-risk 'autonomous zone' (issues that universities can manage and innovate with reasonable autonomy, such as local research training); and the 'contention zone' (academic and operational issues that are centrally controlled which are apparently related to social sensitivity and bear political implications, including student admissions, funding and the conferral of academic degrees).

It becomes apparent that the rules that apply in each zone are a consequence of the nature of the ideology and legitimacy of the political system as a whole. Certain 'policy zones' have allowed for more autonomy and universities' intervention than others depending on the presumed level of political risks and social instability. This seems to resonate with what Mertha and Bella have suggested, that the state accepts public participation in the policy areas where no high-stakes confrontations are posed, and when neither democratisation nor legitimacy is an immediately salient concern (Balla, 2012, pp. 656-657; Mertha, 2008, p. 151).

The leading research universities recognise that the policy constraints in the 'contention zone' hinder their scholarly engagement and public service activities, and threaten their operations, priorities and long-term missions. They have explicitly expressed their grievances, frustration and scepticism that the government and central leaders place their own interests and priorities over those of universities and, more broadly, education. To ensure their capabilities to fulfil their roles and goals, and to seek on its own terms the quality improvement in education, research and other academic activities, the universities have sought a greater autonomy and sustainable funding as being necessary for their service to the public interests. They envisage that such a rightful position requires increasing negotiations and interactions with the government as well as deeper engagement with social forces. Participating in policymaking and cautiously contesting these issues is therefore a way for universities to seek solutions through the conflicts and advance their core interests. The key arenas of interaction remain policies related to institutional autonomy and funding programs formulated by the state.

On the other hand, the universities' consciousness of their rightful position does not translate into contestation of the institutional order or the legitimacy of the regime. For example, instead of attempting to contest policies in the 'no-go zone' (such as the right to elect their own university presidents), Chinese research universities bury their discontent, avoid questioning or contesting, comply with the rules and norms, or purposely manipulate and exploit them to seek their institutional interests and competitive advantages. Leaders of elite universities have developed the ability to adapt to policies in the different zones, and their choices of an advocacy agenda for interactions with the government are largely shaped by a clear perception of what is allowed and what is not, as well as by the level of urgency and risk. They compromise, negotiate and obtain concessions within the bureaucratic structure and within the national and international roles that the government has defined and assigned to them.

However, the substantial gaps between their ideal of modern research universities and the enduring constraints they face create a source of tension that will likely grow and become

more open as the central government continues its uneven progress toward greater economic liberalisation. As Douglass suggests, universities should be leaders in the societal process, engaging in debating the ethics and implications not only of their own fields but of society at large (Douglass, 2012, pp. 642, 659). With education and research becoming a national priority, the multi-skilled university leaders have strengthened their position and influence, shaping public values and disseminating awareness of university autonomy (Jianping Li, 2005, p. 10) . Although the universities' perceptions, roles and capacity are confined by their dependent relationship with the government, these rising powers are likely to be in an unprecedented, advantageous position to negotiate their interests and entitlements in the government policy process.

So how do they interact with the state to influence policies and decisions? What are their strategies and forms of agency? Chapters 3–5 will investigate these issues. The next chapter focuses on universities' collective lobbying practices.

Chapter 3—C9: the alignment of interests amongst universities

One tried and trusted [lobbying] method is simply to research whether there are any other bodies that hold similar or identical views to your own. You can then form a temporary alliance with them, joining forces to try and influence government policy in a specific area.

Lobbying: the art of political persuasion by Lionel Zetter (2011, p. 56)

Introduction

Universities' negotiations and interactions with the government in policy process play a central role in protecting and advancing their interests. This chapter and the next two are devoted to investigating the practices of university lobbying, including occurrences where universities decide to act individually or in a coordinated fashion vis-à-vis state actors. In this chapter particularly, I will explore occurrences where universities' interests are aligned and therefore collective lobbying emerges.

Different types of organisations lobby differently.⁶⁶ Scholars have studied the behaviour of lobby associations and the collective actions of interest groups in various economic sectors of China. When examining the steel, consumer electronics and software industries, for instance, Scott Kennedy (2008) finds that direct contact between businesses and government agencies is generally more prevalent than the actions of associations and interest groups. Associations remain minor players in the lobbying and policymaking processes. Businesses take little interest in associations and, when they do, the result is often failure. Kennedy's work also reveals a certain degree of variation in the extent to which companies attempt to make use of associations (Kennedy, 2008, p. 165): the greater the dominance of State Owned Enterprises

⁶⁶ As noted in Footnote 22, for-profit actors (e.g. corporations or trade associations) typically choose lobbying techniques that differ from those of public interest groups and non-profit sectors (e.g. civil environmental groups). The nature of the policy issues influences a group's lobbying strategy. In the US, for instance, higher education associations are occupationally based non-profit associations and generally fall into the category of non-profit sector. Cook, Gais and Walker suggest that such occupationally based non-profit associations are organised around an economic interest or livelihood and therefore appear to have more self-interest than citizen groups when lobbying, and they usually lobby much the same way that citizen groups do (Cook, 1998, pp. 139-140; Gais & Walker, 1991, pp. 117-119; Schlozman & Tierney, 1986, p. 431).

(SOEs) in one sector, the weaker the role played by trade associations (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, pp. 117, 114). Why?

In an economic sector that is dominated by a few leading SOEs, the large, elite firms are often able to capitalise on their considerable resources and direct ties with the officialdom to influence public policy. They are highly proactive and employ a wide range of lobbying tactics (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 163-167). In addition, the lack of legitimacy of lobbying in China (Cheng, 2006, pp. 44,47-48; Cheng et al., 2003, p. 63; Kennedy, 2009, pp. 213-214) and the political constraints over interest groups and social associations often weaken and restrict the role that trade associations can play (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 163, 171; Unger & Chan, 2008). Kennedy concludes that both 'economic conditions' (e.g., the size of a firm, and the level of competition and market concentration of the sector) and 'political context' (e.g., political institutions and official norms) shape businesses' behaviour and choices on their collective actions as well as the business–government interactions (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 163-174).⁶⁷

Despite their different socio-economic characteristics,⁶⁸ and the particular ambit of their operation, the major Chinese research universities to a certain extent resemble large SOEs. In particular, both have close ties and proximity to the state, and operate in the same political

⁶⁷ Kennedy finds that economic circumstances and political context are significant factors that shape business-government interactions across sectors and how businesses actually exert their influence. Economic factors are particularly salient, if not more than political factors. Economic factors include the level of economic competition and market concentration, and the dominance of SOEs or smaller firms in the sector, and firms' own size. Political context (political institutions and official norms) includes, for instance, the state administrative and regulatory control of associations, the importance of direct political ties, the political system's historical practice of compartmentalising information and semi-transparent processes, and unproductive formal institutions for aggregation of industry interests (Kennedy, 2008, pp. 163-164). As a result, attempts at influence peddling have been driven to take other forms. Lobbying is often highly fragmented, and companies rely on various informal tactics, from privately meeting with policymakers to influencing the media (Kennedy, 2009, pp. 213-214). Businesses mostly interact directly with the state on policy, not relying on trade associations, and they avoid challenging the government's authority. Instead, deference to the state and finding win-win outcomes is the most common strategy (Kennedy, 2008).

⁶⁸ Unlike either enterprises (marketing private goods) or government institutions (providing public goods) (R. Zhang, 2011, pp. 104-105), universities are quasi-public organisations (providing quasi-public goods) with concentrated knowledge, unique socio-economic attributes and functions, peculiar internal institutional structure, as well as independent and academic organisational value and culture. This distinctive nature of universities guides their operation and behaviour, and determines how they relate to and interact with the government and society (Zijie Huang & Cheng, 2010, pp. 190-192; Junzong Zhang, 2004, pp. 8-9). Higher education institutions are also particularly sensitive and reactive to any changes to the institutional environment where they operate (J. Lin, 2004, p. 23).

economy and political system.⁶⁹ The Chinese university sector is highly competitive but dominated by a small number of large, elite players (major research universities) in terms of size, capacity, influence, performance, productivity, and resources, none of which has a monopolistic position. These universities are subject to significant central control and the functional and administrative alignment with the state bureaucracy. They also heavily rely on the government's funding resources and education policies rather than their market position. These attributes may add more distinctiveness to Chinese universities' lobbying behaviour, affecting their motivations, logic of actions, and extent of political influence.

In many countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia, there are various active associations and lobby groups of universities, which are independent, incorporated organisations and legal entities. Examples include the elite advocacy groups such as the Association of American Universities (AAU, 2015a, 2015b; Cook, 1998, pp. 90-91), the UK's Russell Group (Russell Group, 2015a, 2015b), and the Group of Eight Australia (Go8, 2015, 2016a, 2016b), all of which are formed by member universities based on their common interests, and have established a permanent secretariat. These university groups focus on influencing national higher education and research policy, and play an important role in the development of the university sector. They address institutional issues and government actions that affect universities, lead national higher education policy debates, submit policy proposals and present policy analysis, engage with the media to influence the public society, and even openly challenge the authorities on policy issues (AAU, 2015b; Cook, 1998, pp. 145-146; Go8, 2016b; Russell Group, 2015b).

So is there a role or space for interest associations or policy advocacy groups in the Chinese university system? If so, are they weak or powerful? Would elite universities have similar or opposite preferences and attitudes towards collective strategies as those of businesses about trade associations? More importantly, what factors determine the elite universities' choices on their interest alignment and joint lobbying?

This chapter follows the story of the creation, consolidation and decline of a university interest coalition known as 'C9', the first of its kind in China. Through tracing the long journey of the C9, we will gain an in-depth insight into the practices and limitations around the interest alignment and collective actions by the leading Chinese research universities in this unique political and social context. I will also identify some key factors that shape their collective lobbying and outcomes, and briefly discuss the main differences between universities and business which are outlined in Kennedy's and others' work.

⁶⁹ For instance, the authoritarian political system promotes opaque policy process, lacks formal institutions for bottom-up initiatives, and has an aversion to lobby groups, by which both business and universities are affected.

Much of the information in this chapter derives from personal interviews, meeting documents, media reports and literature, as well as personal observations through my direct interactions with the C9 members and frequent involvement in their joint activities.

Rising stars

PKU, one of the most prestigious universities in China, was celebrating its Centenary in May 1998. The occasion required an exceptional speaker. With the support of the MoE and the Beijing municipal government, the university invited then President Jiang Zemin. PKU's cautious suggestions on the content of the leader's speech included a sentence on the promotion of 'socialist world-class universities'. Jiang decided to be even bolder and removed the word 'socialist'. The goal of 'building world-class universities' thus became the central phrase of Jiang's celebratory remarks. The education bureaucracy of MoE and the media drummed up the new slogan, and university officials and academics participated in public sessions to study Jiang's 'important speech'. PKU and Tsinghua, officially and widely recognised as the two most prestigious and influential Chinese universities, seized this opportunity and jointly lobbied the government to put their money where their mouth was.

It was the beginning of Project 985 (as in 1998, May), formally launched the following year to promote a substantial upgrade in infrastructure and research capacity in these two universities and build them to be China's first world-class universities. An unprecedented amount of special central funding entered their coffers, with an initial payment of 3.6 billion yuan for the first three years (round one) (Min & Wen, 2010, pp. 105-110; Guobing Zhang, 2010, pp. 59-62). Collective actions between the top two players played a powerful role in strengthening the advocacy on the centrality of research and education for China's future development strategies. The MoE was also an important actor in this process, advising on and assisting the two institutions' collaboration, and promoting Jiang's speech and '985' proposal to the central bureaucracy and public opinion (Guobing Zhang, 2010, pp. 60-62).

Later in 1999, another seven elite national research universities were handpicked by the government and added to the prestigious Project 985 funding list. The seven institutions were: Fudan University (Fudan); Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU); Nanjing University (NJU); Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT); University of Science and Technology of China (USTC); Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJTU); and Zhejiang University (ZJU). As a result of the significant investment, they have achieved rapid growth and strong performance (Jinchun Li, 2007, p. 49).

Despite further expansion of the Project 985 in the following years,⁷⁰ these nine institutions continue to be referred to as ‘the first nine’ (*qian jiu suo* 前九所), which sets their elite status apart from other Chinese national universities. Among the nine, a de facto ‘2+7’ structure is widely acknowledged and the dominant role of the two backbone universities PKU and Tsinghua remains explicit, which has had a long-term impact on the relationships between the nine universities.

Fast-forward to November 2002. The 16th Party Congress had just appointed a new leadership in President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. The initial years of the decade were a difficult time for the country, with SARS hitting Chinese cities and the consequences of global downturns affecting China in various ways. Wen was widely believed to have an aversion to elitism and was willing to curb inequality in favour of a more equitable distribution of resources in society. This was also true of education. Suddenly Project 985 was on a shaky ground, facing principled opposition at the highest level. The elite national research institutions were concerned, as the failed extension of the funding scheme would be a significant setback. The universities known for their fierce competition suddenly found common ground.

In 2003, they organised, at Tsinghua University in Beijing, the first of what would become a series of annual symposia on ‘Building world-class universities’ (Tsinghua, 2003, p. 104; Zhong Zhou, 2010). Their joint goal was to prove to the leadership, with scientific methods, that Chinese academic institutions were far behind the world leaders in education and research, and that sustained Project 985 funding was imperative for China to catch up with the rest of the world. The MoE agreed and supported, and worked behind the scenes for the same goal. They successfully mobilised national media outlets to receive extensive media coverage and public reports. In particular, at this 2003 symposium, SJTU’s education research team unveiled the ‘Academic Ranking of World Universities’ (ARWU), demonstrating the disadvantaged positions of Chinese universities in the global index. In that ranking, Tsinghua, the top Chinese university, sat at around place 250, while PKU came in second at around 300 (ARWU, 2003).

While the 2003 Tsinghua symposium was a larger affair, with a dozen national universities participating, university leaders described it to me as the first real collective lobbying action by

⁷⁰ More Chinese universities were admitted into the Project 985 in the later years during the further development phases of ‘Project 985’. Its members increased from nine in 1999 to 39 in 2011. In December 2011, Education Minister Yuan Guiren concluded that after a few rounds of project expansion in the last decade, the highly successful ‘985’ project would remain at their current scale from now on and no more universities would be added to the ‘985’ project (Xinhuanet, 2011). See Appendix D for the full list of Project 985 members.

the '2+7' group. During the symposium, participating universities held split views and debated on 'elitism' versus 'equity' in the 985 funding allocations. Some suggested that if the concentration of resources flowed only to the few top universities, it would adversely restrain other universities' development and growth. The Project 985 funding strategy was a national matter, affecting the entire university sector rather than just a few elite institutions. Yet, the '2+7' members argued that it would be a wise strategy for the government to prioritise and concentrate its limited resources on a small number of leading players to lift them to a world-class status. They emphasised that China should take advantage of its old tradition and Deng Xiaoping's slogan of 'concentrating energy on the targeted areas (key stakeholders) to accomplish large undertakings'.⁷¹ They also argued that leading universities would value their significant national missions and social responsibilities; as the vanguards, their breakthroughs and achievements would drive the development of other universities and the entire sector (Tsinghua, 2003, p. 106).

On the day when the Tsinghua symposium concluded, a number of participants (university executives and higher education experts) from the '2+7' institutions gathered for an informal dinner to celebrate the successful event and discuss collaboration strategies. Over dinner, they formed a consensus that the symposium served as an important policy advocacy platform and should be held every year. They agreed to extend it amongst the nine members, as they shared significant common interests, strived for the same goal, and faced similar policy and development challenges. A participant in that fateful dinner explained to me how the membership of the nine was discussed:

We agreed that night that we had to establish and define some boundaries and thresholds for the symposia membership. If all 985 members were included in this annual symposium, it would be too difficult for us to manage. Not that we wanted to exclude anyone intentionally ... Additionally, within the 'nine', the top two members Tsinghua and PKU preferred to call the network '2+7' rather than 'nine', which would differentiate their topmost status from the other seven.

In May 2003, Tsinghua drafted an agreement to formalise the arrangement. It stated that Tsinghua and its Research Institute of Education intended to promote regular discussions on 'building world-class universities' amongst the nine institutions through a series of annual symposia (*yiliu daxue jianshe xilie yantaohui* 一流大学建设系列研讨会). Given the top two leading players' status, Tsinghua first sought endorsement from PKU. After the leaders of both universities signed this agreement, it was circulated to the president's offices of the other

⁷¹ In Chinese, it is '*jizhong liliang ban dashi*' (集中力量办大事).

seven institutions. Soon, this semi-formal collaborative framework was established, and the nine universities agreed to host the joint symposium on an annual rotation basis.

Political patronage

At this point, some MoE officials signalled to the nine universities that they would support and upgrade this elite ‘university symposia network’ to a ‘university alliance’. In particular, during an annual university consultation meeting in early 2004, an education vice minister held a private meeting with a few presidents from the nine institutions about this proposal.⁷² A university president who attended that meeting recalled:

The minister asked us whether we would consider forming a new university group, something like a network or association of research universities. We discussed the idea at that meeting. Tsinghua University agreed to follow up and help draft a proposal on this initiative. Some logistical issues were later sorted, including the formal registration of a civil organisation supervised by the MoE ... We then had another meeting at Tsinghua which involved a key MoE official ... The MoE was involved in most of the following negotiation and progress of the group.

Given that the Chinese government restricts associations or groups in important economic and societal areas (Unger & Chan, 2008, pp. 66-68), and that the MoE generally deals with universities separately, why was a formal alliance of elite universities more applauded than an informal network? One may see that formalising an elite university group was counterproductive for the MoE to maintain its authority and the order and equity agenda in the sector.

There is a good explanation. At that critical time, the MoE was facing difficulties in securing a commitment from the top leadership for the future of Project 985 funds. The risk of losing Project 985 permanently was extremely high, with potential serious consequences. The suspension or loss of the 985 funding was the MoE’s greatest fear. It would considerably reduce the portfolio and resources of education and worsen the low-clout status of the ministry in the central bureaucracy. The desperate and low-profile MoE had to find a creative and potent way to promote Project 985, seek attention, maximise influence, and secure support from the leadership and key central organs. It believed that a collective advocacy and

⁷² As noted in Chapter 1, the MoE hosts the Chinese university consultation meeting (*gaoxiao gongzuo zixunhui* 高校工作咨询会) at the end of each calendar year, attended by senior officials (e.g., state councillors and senior executives from the MoE and other ministries) as well as university leaders (presidents and party secretaries) from a wide range of universities. It invites national universities as well as a small number of local universities to participate. The meeting discussions are often considered for the MoE’s work plan for the following year.

voice of the presidents from the best Chinese universities would make an impact and help its case. It was a strategic decision to take advantage of the nine backbone universities of Project 985, and mobilise a powerful policy advocacy group to jointly target and persuade the central decision-makers. Additionally, due to the MoE's tight control over these universities, the risks of them challenging its authority would be relatively low. Hence, the MoE went against its normal preferences and practices, proposing to formalise a coalition of elite universities. Essentially, it was patronage from the MoE to advance certain interests within the government's political structure. One interviewee recalled:

In the MoE's plan, this university alliance would not target the MoE, but the top leaders, the State Council, the Leading Small Group for Science, Technology and Education (LSGSTe), the National People's Congress (NPC), the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), as well as the public.

Because Tsinghua was nominated as the chair and the location of the secretariat of the group, the MoE provided guidance and assistance directly to Tsinghua to resolve the group's legal and operational issues, including the formal application and registration with the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs as a civil group and the sponsorship of MoE as its supervisory authority.⁷³

Tsinghua also drafted a group constitution (*zhangcheng* 章程).⁷⁴ Despite its policy advocacy in nature, the university coalition was self-portrayed as a 'high-level education forum' which would 'drive the development of Chinese research universities and raise the public profile of higher education in China'.

In early April 2004, SJTU hosted the second 'Building world-class universities serial symposium', which was chaired by the then SJTU President Xie Shengwu, and attended by the nine institutions and government officials from the MoE and the State Council.⁷⁵ Its theme was 'Exploring and optimising funding resources to achieve development targets'. SJTU announced its latest results of Chinese universities' positions in the ARWU world ranking system, highlighting the significant gaps and disadvantages between them and some leading foreign research institutions (ARWU, 2004b; Tsinghua, 2004). The nine universities again argued that

⁷³ In China, all civil groups must be registered, authorised and supervised by a formal government agency. In this case, the MoE offered to sponsor the new group as its central supervisory organ.

⁷⁴ The constitution states that the group's goal is to provide a high-level education forum on the development of leading research universities as well as on the higher education reforms, theories and practices, which helps build Chinese world-class universities. The group strives to raise education and research quality and performance, raise universities' public profile, drive research universities' development, and share research findings and work experiences (Tsinghua, 2004).

⁷⁵ The meeting attendees (60 people or so) included the officials from the MoE and the State Council.

the government should concentrate its limited resources on a few leading players to achieve the best outcomes. They suggested that it was imperative for the government to commence the second funding round of Project 985 as soon as possible, and give the leading research universities a greater institutional autonomy.

As an important agenda of this symposium, the nine universities formally discussed a 'self-initiated' university group.⁷⁶ Tsinghua briefed on its preparation and progress, circulated the draft constitution, and iterated the group's objectives and operation. Especially, Tsinghua presented its study on the successful international models of university groups, including the US's AAU (Tsinghua, 2004, p. 120). However, the nine universities did not reach a formal agreement at the meeting, partially because several university presidents were absent, and partially due to a shared concern of the political sensitivity around formalising an interest coalition. In the end, the participants tentatively agreed to establish a group at 'an appropriate time'. They emphasised that when established, the new group should 'limit the size of its membership', and should 'handle the relationships with other universities discreetly'.

Several participants of that meeting told me that they sensed an uneasiness during and after the meeting. Many felt that it was still too risky and premature to formalise a new policy-focused university coalition at that time, despite the initial endorsement by some MoE officials. A C9 university president pointed out that the MoE also seemed to be pulling away its support:

Despite its initial support, we sensed that the MoE had some hesitation and declining enthusiasm, so we just decided to let it [the proposal] sit for a period. However, our university coalition had already taken shape and solidified in practice, and the nine members had started collaborating closely, even though the group was not formally registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs as a civil organisation.

The change of MoE's attitude may be well explained by the fact that in early 2004, the national leadership eventually capitulated and accepted that Project 985 funding should continue, and that the top universities would enjoy the largest share of the funding. 'Catching up with world-class universities' became more important than equity again. Maintaining the order of the

⁷⁶ Based on the MoE's advice, Tsinghua proposed that the group might be called 'Association of Chinese Research Universities' (ACRU) (*zhongguo yanjiuxing daxue lianhehui* 中国研究型大学联合会). This is not to be confused with the other association of research universities which was unsuccessfully proposed by Renmin University in 2007–2008 (see Chapter 1 Footnote 34).

university sector also became more important. Hence the political urgency to support this university coalition and influence the national policy sharply declined.

Nevertheless, undoubtedly the MoE played a key role during the early years of the group in providing political patronage, cultivating the idea of a university advocacy alliance, and facilitating the formalisation of the group. These leading universities saw the benefits of collective actions and were keen to sustain and strengthen their interest alignment to further advance their competitive advantages in the government policies.

Consolidation: collective activities and advocacy

The symposia in the following three years took place at Nanjing University (NJU), USTC and HIT, respectively. During this period, their lobby collaboration was further consolidated. The focus of their discussion had shifted from the conceptual analysis of the idea of world-class universities to specific government policies. The convenors of the symposia moved to their president's offices and started to include more informal networking activities, including banquets, lab tours and local sightseeing.⁷⁷ Journalists continued to be invited to the open sessions.

The nine executive deans of graduate schools became highly active and collaborative. They held separate, concurrent joint sessions on specific policy issues during and between the symposia, which they also invited relevant government officials to participate. This helped them acquire policy updates, present policy concerns, and offer suggestions and recommendations directly to the government.⁷⁸

The nine university leaders played a growing part in driving the group activities, too. They began to hold a separate joint meeting during each symposium, attended by senior government representatives, where they discussed policy issues and strategies informally.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ In the earlier years of the symposia series, the main coordinators at each university were the policy research offices, higher education research institutes, as well as the 985/211 offices (often located within the graduate schools).

⁷⁸ For instance, in 2006, the meeting discussed the reform of the university admissions policies so as to increase the universities' autonomy in selecting and recruiting students. In 2007, the meeting discussed national policies and university operational issues including increasing institutional autonomy on the use of government funds, and the reform of university human resources system.

⁷⁹ The attending government officials varied each year. They often came from the MoE and the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council (located at the MoE), the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and others. Within the MoE, the participating officials regularly came from the MoE Department of Higher Education, the MoE Department of Development and Planning, and others. The university leaders often asked these participating officials to brief

They agreed that the attendance of all nine presidents was important and hence should be mandated. If a university president was unable to join the annual symposium, the party secretary of that university (who generally doubles as chairman of university council and the top party representative of a university) or a vice president would fill in.⁸⁰ The MoE and State Council were frequently involved in these activities. In addition, after each of their annual symposia and presidents meetings concluded, the nine universities submitted a joint report to the relevant government departments, summarising the universities' policy discussions and advocacy.

A university president said:

Each year we focused on the current, major policy issues at our annual joint meetings. Our discussions and views were often picked up by the government and media, shaping forthcoming policy agendas and directions, and impacting on the sector and society.

On one side, they promoted a generic, pro-education agenda with a big-picture, in-principle approach. For instance, they drummed up the importance of the strategy to 'build world-class universities', and the central role of Projects 985 and 211. They appealed for a higher funding rate for each university student and a regular increase of the central budgetary allocations for national education. They asked the government to remove rigid restrictions and frequent audits for the spending of the government funds, and to allow universities to have a greater discretion on student selection and admissions. They advised the government on the reform for the central university entrance examinations, the degrees awarding system, as well as research training models. In particular, they pushed for an 'institutional governance reform for modern universities' to enhance the power and autonomy of university academics.

Apparently, these issues largely reflected their own policy concerns, firsthand experiences and development priorities. Yet, they were also long-term challenges affecting many other universities. Hence, by taking the lead to negotiate these issues with the government through collective actions, the group played a positive role in seeking resolutions and improvements,

them on current policy issues, such as the policy plans and measures for the undergraduate recruitment reform and the postgraduate entrance examination reform.

⁸⁰ In terms of the internal hierarchy in universities, university presidents are in charge of daily academic and professional operations, but they are supervised by their party secretaries (who double as chair of the university council) and need their approval on significant institutional matters. Chapter 2 and Diagram 2.1 provide details about their roles in the senior university management system. In addition, notably, not all the university leaders participated in their joint meetings in 2003, 2004 and 2005. In 2006, however, all the nine university leaders attended the forum.

which would benefit other stakeholders in the higher education community and society at large.

On the other, they focused on three specific areas of joint advocacy, and adopted a focused, localised approach to advance their special interests and competitive advantage.

First, they debated with other national institutions on the 'elitism versus equity' models for allocation of the government funds, and strongly advocated that the state should concentrate its financial resources on a small number of elite players. Since 1999, other national institutions had actively lobbied the state for their fair share of the 985 investments, which resulted in the expansions of Project 985 membership. The inclusion of more institutions unavoidably led to a dilution of the central resources. Hence, to prevent its further expansion, since 2003, the nine promoted a performance-based, high-entry point threshold for any university to enter the Project 985, and a regular accreditation and periodic performance review system.

Additionally, in order to maintain their large share of the funding, they jointly advocated 'funding concentration' and 'separate funding' strategies. For instance, at one joint meeting, the nine members drafted and proposed a long-term strategic plan (to 2020) for future Project 985, based on the needs of the 'comprehensive development of the top-tier universities'. In the proposal, university presidents outlined their achievements as a result of Projects 985 and 211 funds, and called for a separate set of funding conditions for the first nine universities to further strengthen their development. Moreover, over the years, they highlighted their leading role in the 'national mission to advance science and education' and 'building a knowledge economy', which was shaped by the official directives, commitments and language. They repeatedly employed the rhetoric and slogans of the state to legitimise and frame their claims, such as 'concentrating energy on the targeted areas (key stakeholders) to accomplish large undertakings' (*jizhong liliang ban dashi* 集中力量办大事), and 'achieving breakthroughs through prioritisation' (*zhongdian tupo* 重点突破).

Second, the group advocated that privileged treatment and a much greater institutional autonomy should be provided to the nine leading players, so that they could achieve world-class quality sooner, set up successful exemplary models in the sector, and help develop sound public policies. These privileges would include favourable student admission quotas, relaxed university personnel policies, greater flexibility for their use of government funds, generous operational expenditures, a higher government funding rate for each student at the nine institutions, as well as a separate quality assessment and evaluation system. In particular, they proactively pursued opportunities and permissions to undertake new policy innovation and

reform trials at their institutions.⁸¹ They argued that as the most reputable and mature Chinese universities, their local policy trials would be able to provide good examples, test new ideas, and reduce the risks and drawbacks often caused by broader reforms. Essentially, the goal of such experimentation was to seek legitimate privileges and competitive advantages in autonomy and resources. Individually and collectively, the special, trial policies they advocated included a pilot trial of autonomous student selection, new research training models, PhD admissions reform, and the elimination of standardised national postgraduate entrance exams.

For example, in 2007 and the following years, the group collectively lobbied the state for a local policy trial of 'PhD admissions reform' at their institutions, with the aim to lift policy restrictions and increase allocated student quotas in their recruitment of PhD students. They organised joint group meetings with officials and also interacted with them separately. In addition to presenting data, facts and policy analysis, the nine members kept reminding these officials that they had the moral support and backing from the top leaders who handpicked them to 'build Chinese world-class universities' as a national strategic priority. They claimed that the current policy restrictions of PhD admissions severely hindered universities' development and undermined their fulfilment of the national goals and missions. They pleaded that it was an obligation and responsibility of the central government bureaucracy to support their endeavours, alter the policy parameters, and deliver on the leaders' directives. There would be 'negative consequences' if the relevant departments did not make the changes soon. In the end, they received the permission for a 10% annual increase in PhD admissions in exchange for an increased efficiency with non-performing students,⁸² which was a much greater allowance than other universities. This was seen as a significant success in a policy area that had long been off limits for any negotiation.

As an interviewee heavily involved in the policy trial suggested, this special policy trial had 'opened the door' to a greater flexibility and incremental reform for the future. Once the

⁸¹ Policy experimentation has a long tradition in China. Sebastian Heilmann has observed an unorthodox combination of novel policy experimentation with long-term policy prioritisation in China over the last few decades in the economy field, which is characterised by 'foresighted tinkering' (Heilmann, 2009). Heilmann observes that the Chinese point-to-surface approach entails a policy process that is initiated from individual 'experimental points' and driven by local initiative with the formal or informal backing of higher-level policy-makers. If judged conducive by the government, the 'model experiences' from the initial experiments will be disseminated, refined and expanded to more and more regions (Heilmann, 2008, pp. 2-4, 29-30). Such approach is in fact commonly seen and well developed in education policies. I will discuss this more in Chapter 5.

⁸² A policy green light was eventually given to the C9 members, but with certain conditions. As a compromise, the C9 agreed to a 10% elimination rate of poor performing PhD students, in order to ensure quality.

thinking of the government has some 'inertia' (*guanxing siwei* 惯性思维), it will lead to a long-term, regular increase. He added:

Our universities will continue to negotiate and push for a larger increase each year—10% this time, 20% the next. This policy [trial] has helped increase the autonomy in this area for other national universities too and ultimately benefited the entire sector.

Third, the nine universities cautiously sought the government's recognition and endorsement of their formal grouping with 'the top nine' branding. Having been increasingly exposed to the experience of university groups internationally, the nine agreed that forming a university coalition with like-minded peers would maximise their mutual interests and policy influence, as well as help achieve their individual goals. By formalising their collective brand and quality threshold, they would strengthen their privileged, leading status in the competitive sector, and secure their funding concentration and greater autonomy. If successful, the establishment of their elite university group would become China's first of its kind and a significant new experiment in the sector.

However, it was a tough issue. Social groups and associations were tightly regulated by the Chinese government. The tension between the nine and the other universities was growing. The MoE had reduced its support and involvement in the group since the Project 985 crisis ended in 2004. In facing these obstacles, the nine institutions spent several years testing the waters, setting the scene and laying the foundation.

The university leaders publicly promoted the importance of their 'grouping' for the country and the potential win-win outcomes. They also acted prudently and highlighted their loyalty and commitment to the government and its directives. For instance, in 2005, the then Nanjing University President Jiang Shusheng, who was chair of the 2005 symposium, made an opening address stressing that the nine universities had a strong sense of national responsibility and faith, and should strengthen their concrete collaboration and take some coordinated actions on common policies. Their network would facilitate China's goal of developing world-class universities (NJU, 2005). In 2006, the group chair, USTC Party Secretary Guo Chuanjie, reiterated that university coalitions such as the US's AAU played an important part in driving the development of the higher education sectors in their countries and the world. Similarly, the nine Chinese research universities' collaboration network should be strengthened to advance Chinese higher education's world-class development (USTC, 2006). Again, in 2007 the nine university leaders promoted their joint view that as the research leaders shared national responsibilities and common goals, their coalition should be crystallised and endorsed by the nation. They argued that they should not fight alone and single-handed, instead they should

grow and mature together through positive interactions. Forming a research university coalition was the global trend and practice, and should also be considered in China. In that year, a formal collaboration agreement for research training was signed by the nine universities (HIT, 2007).

As they had agreed at the 2004 joint meeting, they had been ‘waiting for the right time’ and preparing for the next significant milestone of the group.

Formal establishment: C9 coalition

In October 2008, Zhejiang University (ZJU) hosted the group’s annual symposium and the joint presidents’ meeting in Hangzhou, in which various government officials participated. Apart from the usual public campaign for a university coalition, the nine leaders had one important agenda item for their private meeting: the formal establishment of a new university group.

As an unusual move, they invited Australia’s Group of Eight (Go8) Executive Director Michael Gallagher to present at the private presidents’ meeting, attended by a deputy education minister. It was the first time they had ever involved a foreign group in their joint activities. The Go8 was asked to deliver a presentation on the grouping of Australian leading research universities, and share its experience on how the Go8 was established and operated, how it worked with the Australian federal government, and how it benefited and facilitated the development of Go8 members and the Australia’s higher education sector in general. The motive was explicit. The nine universities mobilised a third-party ally and foreign expert to help their case and enhance their capacity of persuasion. A participant in that meeting recalled:

We required ‘external forces’ to push things forward. Go8 could help lobby and persuade our government from a foreign expert and objective advisor’s perspective about the value of a Chinese elite university group. Sometimes, ‘foreign pressure’ is more influential and effective in interacting with our government.

The presentation went well. The meeting participants nodded in approval, including the vice minister. After the Go8 representatives left the meeting room, they continued their private discussion with the MoE officials. A few moments later, the presidents re-emerged at the dinner reception. The exciting news was out: the presidents received the tacit approval of the government on the establishment of a group; and they also discussed and agreed to the ‘group constitution’ drafted by ZJU. Interestingly, the officials informally suggested that the new group should be named ‘*jiuxiao lianxi huiyi*’ (九校联席会议) in Chinese.⁸³ The carefully chosen

⁸³ In Chinese society, the group is also often called as ‘the coalition of nine schools’ (*jiuxiao lianmeng* 九校联盟).

Chinese name refers to a 'forum' or 'joint meeting' of nine universities, demonstrating a voluntary and informal arrangement, rather than a formal, consolidated alliance. This vague language was also meant to avoid legal and financial accounting complexities, and to reduce tension arising from concerns of other Chinese universities. In contrast, the group named itself differently in English as 'Consortium of China Nine Research Universities' or 'C9', which projected a more 'radical' stance and confident image as a formalised group to international partners.

Shortly after this joint event, the group establishment document was finalised and signed by the nine presidents. A copy was also sent to the MoE. The first self-initiated elite university coalition in China was officially established, discreetly and quietly. The nine presidents had unanimously agreed to keep low key about this historic development without attracting too much attention. They wanted to move gradually and avoid domestic tension. They saw their arrangement evolving over several years towards a more definite organisation.

Group's operational agreement

So what did they agree to in 2008 as a group? According to the C9's mission and operational guidelines listed in the minutes of the meeting (C9, 2008), the objectives of the new group included: to strengthen the communications and collaborations among the nine universities; to build world-class universities and lead the development of China's higher education system; to raise the Chinese universities' profile and influence in the global academia; to enhance C9's international engagement and dialogue with other international university consortia and leading universities; and to strengthen China's capacity and efforts to solve the global and regional challenges.

In terms of operation, the group maintained the annual chair rotation system;⁸⁴ the executive chair and secretariat of C9 (the host university of the annual symposium and the presidents' meeting) would rotate yearly amongst the nine members; and the director of the president's office of the host university would act as secretary general for that year.

The annual C9 presidents' meeting would continue to be held during the annual symposia series on 'building world-class universities'. However, if necessary, the executive chair could

⁸⁴ The C9 has adopted an annual chair rotation system amongst the nine presidents without a permanent secretariat. C9 presidents usually decide their next chair at their annual meeting. When a C9 president is selected to be the forthcoming chair, s/he will host the following year's C9 annual meeting on a specific theme and act as a group coordinator during a certain timeframe. However, the hand-over procedure and timeline between the current and next chairs have been unclear and controversial.

convene special C9 high-level meetings to discuss important agenda related to the collaboration of the nine universities.

In relation to group branding, the nine members would explore the options to create an official C9 website, design a C9 logo, and establish an IT platform for group communications and resource sharing, as well as form a C9 brand by promoting joint academic and social activities.

Last, but not least, the nine members agreed to strengthen their cooperation on education, research, community engagement, and talent training. Regular meetings and seminars would be organised for C9 offices with equivalent administrative functions, such as directors of policy and planning, and directors of teaching affairs.⁸⁵

‘Policy influencing’ and ‘policy advocacy’ were never mentioned, although these had been central to the group activities since 2003 and would continue to be. Avoiding the association of the C9 with a lobby group was critical. As my interviewees said, the government might have informally accepted the C9 as a platform for collaboration, but it ‘would never formally legitimise or support its bottom-up lobbying role’, as it implied the risk of ‘political challenge, contention or [organised] resistance against the authority’. A university president suggested to me that this group would only survive if it avoided defining, labelling and behaving like a lobby group.

The C9 did not incorporate or apply to become a civil association. Such a legal formalisation was thought would touch the nerves of the government and other universities.

Public announcement

In 2009, XJTU became the new symposium host and chair of C9 presidents’ meeting. It decided to seize the opportunity and formally publicise the new C9 group through a high-profile event in Xi’an. On 9th October 2009, XJTU invited Zhao Xiping, who had just retired as deputy education minister, to address the annual symposium.⁸⁶ It also mobilised third-party allies,

⁸⁵ During 2008–2009, the C9 started to expand and deepen the group cooperation at other levels of key university personnel, such as C9 directors of policy and planning, directors of teaching affairs, and directors of president’s offices. In addition to the presidents and C9 executive deans of graduate studies who usually held regular, separate meeting sessions, other C9 sub-committees have also gradually formed their own regular meeting mechanisms. New ideas raised and formed by C9 presidents were passed onto the relevant C9 sub-committees of equivalent administrative roles to follow up and operationalise.

⁸⁶ Zhao publicly praised and endorsed the group at the opening. He said, ‘The annual joint meetings of the nine universities have been very important. This is the seventh year and the first one held in our western region ... It has provided a fantastic opportunity for us to discuss the issues of building world-class universities ... I hope that the

higher education experts, to speak at the event on the global trends and benefits of forming university coalitions (XJTU, 2009; Zhao, 2009).⁸⁷

More importantly, XJTU organised a formal signing ceremony for a C9 group agreement by the nine university leaders, witnessed by the government and media. This agreement derived from the 2008 C9 document, explicitly confirming their decision of formal grouping, and outlined their key collaborative areas.⁸⁸ This news quickly attracted widespread attention, and pushed the elite C9 group into the public spotlight.

News reports and online discussions about the new powerful 'C9 coalition' surged. Several C9 presidents accepted media interviews to improve the public understanding and support of the group.⁸⁹ For instance, SJTU President Zhang Jie spoke with China National Radio (CNR) on 14 October 2009 (CNR, 2009):

This group is a collective alliance of China's nine leading, comprehensive universities ... The C9 embodies Chinese characteristics and a Chinese model [of higher education]. It brings together the power of a few universities with similar characteristics to help build Chinese world-class universities collaboratively.

The rise of the C9 attracted wide discussions and different reactions. Especially, scepticism and criticisms quickly grew within the sector. The leaders of some other national universities attempted to join this elite group, but became bitter and angry when they were rejected. They openly slammed and challenged the group, defining it as an 'exclusive, self-interested university presidents club', and accusing the C9 of 'disadvantaging other national institutions'

joint meetings of nine will become more and more successful, and will deepen exchanges and consolidate joint work, and engage with the world better' (XJTU, 2009; Zhao, 2009).

⁸⁷ The head of Research Institute for Educational Policy and Law, Beijing Normal University, for instance, spoke at the conference. He said that under the current circumstances, it was imperative to form university coalitions and share resources, and the grouping of universities was a trend and direction for the development of higher education.

⁸⁸The full title of the agreement is 'Agreement on talent training collaboration and exchange' (*rencai peiyang hezuo yu jiaoliu xieyishu* 人才培养合作与交流协议书). The agreement included the following objectives: to carry out undergraduate exchange and postgraduate joint training; complete credit recognition among the nine members; host joint C9 summer schools; strengthen collaboration with the US's Ivy League and Australia's Go8; establish a joint C9 website; establish a joint online review system for PhD theses evaluation; carry out joint work on teaching material and teaching reform; develop joint academic programs and online education portal; hold joint undergraduate internship programs; and drive national research training reform (Q. Wang, 2009; XJTU, 2009; Zhao, 2009).

⁸⁹ They included the then Zhejiang University President Yang Wei, Fudan University President Yang Yuliang, Xi'an Jiaotong University President Zheng Nanning, and Shanghai Jiao Tong University President Zhang Jie.

and ‘damaging the equity of the sector’. Some even made formal complaints to the MoE, urging the government to intervene and dismiss it.⁹⁰ Many believed that the C9’s establishment was too sensitive and controversial to succeed in such a context.

Despite its informal involvement and acknowledgement of the group, the MoE remained obscure and silent about the C9 in public. It was indeed caught in a dilemma in the debate and pressure from the sector. The only time it formally commented on the C9 was at a MoE media conference on 26th October 2009. When asked by a journalist about the government’s view on the C9 coalition, the MoE spokeswoman Xu Mei made the following statement (China News, 2009):

There is an Ivy League in the US, which includes top institutions like Harvard and Yale. We recently saw that there is a similar university coalition called the Group of Eight in Australia, which includes prestigious Australian universities such as the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne. We have also noticed that a joint collaboration agreement was signed by the first nine university entrants in Project 985, including Peking, Tsinghua and Fudan. The coalition of the nine institutions is a very beneficial and advantageous exploration for China to build high-level universities, train elite and innovative talents, as well as strengthen international collaborations. The MoE has a positive and supportive attitude towards this coalition.

In addition to this positive comment, a dedicated ‘C9’ webpage was added to the homepage of a website of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council, which doubled as the MoE Department of Postgraduate Education and was chaired by a state councillor. The page included the following line, ‘As a result of the establishment of the coalition by nine prestigious Chinese universities, China’s very first elite university league was born’ (CDGDC, 2009). The party-controlled *People’s Daily* also set up a special English web section to introduce the C9. The page noted, ‘In 2009, nine Chinese universities formalised an elite group to foster better students and share their resources. This group is called C9 League, China’s Ivy League (People’s Daily, 2009).’

⁹⁰ For instance, there were numerous reports and recounts that the then President of Renmin University, Gu Jibao, a former head of the MoE research and development centre, had tried to pressure the C9 universities to accept his university to join the C9 group. When he failed, the university slammed the C9, questioned its legitimacy and urged the MoE to suspend it.

Retreat and decline

Despite the above acknowledgement by the state, the C9 very soon encountered explicit pushbacks from the MoE. For instance, the C9 was ignored when it sought the MoE's permission to set up a permanent secretariat. This was ironic given that it had been the MoE itself that proposed a permanent secretariat at Tsinghua for the group in 2004. The C9's initial intention was to avoid a permanent secretariat in order to minimise political sensitivity and tension. However, since 2008, the lack of a stable, central coordination support and the difficulties in undertaking collaborative activities suggested the need for a more permanent structure. At the end of 2009, a C9 presidents' delegation visited the Go8 Secretariat and Go8 universities in Australia. Upon its return, the delegation submitted a joint C9 report to the MoE, outlining the things they learnt from their Australian counterpart during the trip, including the importance of a permanent secretariat to facilitate the group activities and operation. It pleaded for the government's permission and support for the C9 to set up a similar secretariat. The MoE never responded.

In the years following the group's formal establishment, the annual symposia and presidents' meetings proceeded as agreed, yet the C9 achieved much more on its internal academic and professional exchanges as well as international collaboration than in its policy interactions with the government.

Internally, the group deepened its cooperation at various management and academic levels and continued to hold regular professional meetings (for example, amongst directors of policy and planning and deans of undergraduate education). Increasingly, the members shared best practices and strategies in operational areas including academic and research management, information management, and the reporting and auditing system. After the establishment of the C9, the internal undergraduate and postgraduate student exchanges had grown and expanded. The C9 deans of graduate schools remained actively engaged with officials and achieved some success in certain policy trials, such as the PhD admissions reform and increase of student quotas by 10% from 2012. However, competition and conflicts of interest did exist amongst the nine members, especially in the areas of student recruitment and government funding. In 2010–2011, for instance, some members could not agree on a joint C9 undergraduate student recruitment policy trial, so they went separate ways and teamed up with some other national universities to conduct the trial.

Internationally, the C9 presidents promoted the 'C9' branding and strengthened partnerships with other leading university groups. For instance, in the 2010 presidents' meeting in Shanghai, C9 presidents signed a collaborative framework Memorandum of Understanding

with Australia's Go8. In 2012, the Go8, AAU and the League of European Research Universities (LERU) attended the C9 meetings to exchange views on global world-class universities and explore collaboration options. In 2013, particularly, the C9 signed a joint Hefei Statement on the 'ten characteristics of contemporary research universities' with other international university groups, including AAU, LERU and Go8 (Go8 et al., 2013). However, the C9's practical activities with its international partners seemed to have been restrained by its lack of a permanent secretariat.

In the domestic environment, the C9 maintained a humble and cautious approach when facing the government and other universities' scrutiny. Importantly, despite the group's formal establishment, it continued to operate in an unstructured, informal manner without a central office, and was often referred to as a 'loose network' or 'forum'. This reduced the collective policy influence of the group.

In particular, despite their regular discussions on the group's policy positions and strategies, the C9 presidents progressively reduced their policy collaboration and joint lobbying actions, and their joint meetings seemed to become more of a formality. For instance, at the presidents' meetings in 2011 and 2012, university leaders deliberated the current policy issues and C9's future development plan, including how to handle the tricky relationship with other non-C9 Project 985 universities, and how to strengthen their collective policy capacity and influencing. C9 presidents also invited senior MoE representatives to participate and share policy updates,⁹¹ and raised common concerns about some new policies and bring them to MoE officials' attention. However, no concrete actions followed after these discussions. This lack of collective action amongst the presidents affected the group policy cooperation at other levels as well. In 2009–2010, C9 deans of graduate studies drafted a joint proposal letter to the government on graduate education policies, but the plan was soon abandoned because one of the C9 presidents refused to sign the letter.

According to a university president, on one occasion, before the third round of Project 985 funding was launched, the MoE submitted an operational plan for the project to the State Council. The C9 presidents were concerned by the MoE's proposal, and they needed to act immediately before the policy decision was finalised. Hence, they made a bold decision to send an urgent joint petition letter directly to the state councillor in charge of education.

⁹¹ For example, in 2012, the head of a MoE department was invited to the C9 presidents' meeting to provide briefing about the new national project '2011 Scheme', including the current progress and structure of the draft policy and the involvement and advocacy of the Ministry of Finance in the policy.

This letter contained policy recommendations that were very different from what the MoE had proposed. The C9 explicitly advocated that the forthcoming round of Project 985 should provide a differentiated policy for C9 universities to strengthen their development and optimise their performance, including favourable funding, a separate evaluation system, as well as increased postgraduate recruitment quotas. All presidents signed the final letter, and one of them volunteered to hand it over to the state councillor in person, claiming that he had a good personal relationship with her.

Yet, a week later, there was still no reaction, and concerned C9 presidents phoned the messenger to ask for news. It turned out that he had singlehandedly decided to pull out of the plan without informing or consulting the other presidents. Everyone was shocked that he had ‘hijacked’ the letter and prevented it from going out to the government. He later explained to another C9 president that he did not want them to ‘take the risk of offending the MoE’, which might lead to political reprisals against the group, the universities and personal careers.

After a number of similar attempts failed, one president openly expressed his frustration at a C9 presidents’ meeting:

In the west, rules and principles usually come before real actions. In China, we tend to try things out and accumulate practical experiences before developing the rules. The C9 group now has accumulated nine or ten years’ experience—shouldn’t it be enough for us to take some real collective action?!

Factors contributing to the decline

There are a number of factors contributing to the decline of the C9.

After the 2003–2004 crisis catalysed their collaboration, no other major crisis consolidated the need for close, joint actions. For instance, in 2010, another round of 985 funding was distributed to universities, followed by the MoE and MoF’s announcement of China’s Education Reform and Development Guideline (2010-2020), which promised that Project 985 funding would be extended to 2020 (L. Xu, 2014a).⁹² The longer-term security placated the concerns of the university presidents. Despite their common interests in many other policy issues, the urgency, motivation and incentives to invest in collective lobbying actions declined.

⁹² In 2010, the national strategy of ‘building world-class universities’ and Project 985 were strengthened in the ‘Medium and Long-term National Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)’ as a policy priority (Xinhuanet, 2011).

This was particularly true of the most powerful universities PKU and Tsinghua which had already secured the ‘top two’ status and enjoyed special policy privileges.

The political and regulatory environment also inhibited collective action. The powerful interest group faced political scrutiny, scepticism and restrictions from the state, which were exacerbated by the complaints and pressure of other universities.

In the early years, the MoE was an important ally which helped cultivate and formalise the C9 coalition and was heavily involved in its initial development. Yet, from 2009, the MoE became increasingly reluctant to legitimise the C9 group, despite its rising international reputation and domestic profile in recent years. Some key officials who personally supported the establishment of the C9 had left their senior positions, whereas their successors held a more sceptical view about the group. There was also a decreased urgency for a policy collaboration between the MoE and C9 universities on Project 985, compared to 2003 and 2004. Using the C9’s collective influence to lobby the central leadership and other ministries thus became much less important for the MoE.

In the meantime, some universities vigorously attacked and criticised the so-called ‘exclusive university presidents club’, urging the MoE to dismiss the group and to maintain equity and fairness in the sector. In public meetings and official documents, the MoE avoided identifying or differentiating C9 universities from others in the sector.

Most importantly, according to university executives, the MoE became increasingly suspicious of the C9, interpreting its ‘collective policy voice’ as ‘a political challenge or organised resistance against the authority’, ‘ganging up to resist the central control’, a ‘potential threat of authority’ and ‘source of instability’. It refused to support a C9 permanent secretariat. A C9 university president told me that the government was constantly making disapproving gestures towards C9:

It has often signalled us [presidents] many times that ‘I know you exist, but do not try to gang up on me, or communicate with me in this collective, group form.’ Collective actions really touch the nerves of the government and cause much political sensitivity.

In 2012, Deputy Education Minister Du Yubo addressed the annual C9 symposium. The speech acknowledged the nine universities’ important national roles and its international collaboration, which seemingly signalled an official acceptance of the C9 as a formal alliance. However, Du and other government officials walked out of the conference venue as soon as they finished the government speeches, unwilling to stay and listen to the policy discussions during the presidents’ meeting. It was generally seen as a snub for the ideas of the C9. Such a

negative attitude significantly limited the C9's lobbying opportunities and capacity. After all, a meaningful and effective policy dialogue requires an open ear on the government's side.

As several university leaders told me, the government might have informally accepted the C9 as a platform for mutual collaboration, but it would always remain wary and hostile about this type of organised form of collective policy advocacy and reluctant to legitimise or engage with it. In practice, the MoE silently restrained this interest group to protect its own authority and maintain the original order of the sector. A university director of policy explained to me:

The MoE has its concerns. China never had such an influential university coalition. The MoE does not want the C9 to exist in a formal, structured form, as it [C9] would become too substantial and independent. It would be too difficult for the MoE to keep it under control. In this sector controlled by the government, an independent university association has never been allowed to exist in China's history.

Another university executive said:

If several top national universities are leading the talk and collectively running the show, their group could become, or be seen, almost as the second Chinese Ministry of Education or something similarly powerful... The officials feel threatened and disgruntled.

Furthermore, there was an increasing split of interests between the 'two' and the 'seven'. According to Hula, there are three types of coalition members: core members, players, and tag-alongs. They vary considerably depending on their long-term and short-term goals. Core members seek a bill or a key element of legislation. Players are satisfied if they can alter a paragraph or two in a bill. The tag-alongs lend their support, even though everyone recognises that they will not marshal their membership or be particularly active. In the words of one lobbyist: 'All right, as a favour, use our name' (Hula, 2000). This pattern was truly reflected in the C9's internal dynamics. The most influential, privileged members, Tsinghua and PKU, shifted their role from proactive core players of the early years to passive tag-alongs with decreasing enthusiasm and involvement, especially at the policy front. The other seven had more to gain from the prestigious group's collective influence, and hence became core players to advance the C9's policy agendas and joint actions. In this process, all members demonstrated a strong self-interested focus.

In the early years, the seven were the two's important allies who helped secure the future of Project 985 during the 2003–2004 crisis. However, Tsinghua and PKU had maintained the view that they were in the topmost position of the hierarchical sector and in a more advanced development phase than the other seven. They already enjoyed a wide range of special policy

privileges, and had close, more direct ties with the officialdom. Therefore, their common interests with the seven on policies, as well as their motivation and need to use the C9 on policy issues, remained relatively low. The exception was provided by common concerns about the new funding rounds of Project 985, which needed a collective strategy and voice. Additionally, the two felt that this C9 brand diluted their superior status, and their influence was being capitalised by the other members to their own advantage. Hence, over the years, the two institutions strengthened policy lobbying collaboration with each other to advance their mutual interests and shape government decisions, and had been highly successful. One interviewee from Tsinghua explained their policy partnership and why the two often 'acted separately' without talking to the seven:

We [Tsinghua and PKU] often receive early notice and intelligence on policies that the central government is developing. When we share common views on policy issues, we often have to take immediate joint actions and tackle them before decisions are finalised and things are locked in, otherwise it will be too late. We cannot afford to waste any time by consulting other universities. Despite complaints from other institutions, we believe that we are doing a service to all universities.

Due to their significant individual influence, the interference or reluctance of PKU and Tsinghua undermined and dampened any collective lobbying attempts by the C9 group. For example, when PKU and Tsinghua became the C9 chair in 2011 and 2014 respectively, their lack of enthusiasm and commitment weakened the C9 group activities. They shortened and downsized the C9 meetings, and downplayed or postponed joint activities or decisions. Such an attitude seemed to imply that they intended to phase out the coalition. The other seven, on the other hand, had remained motivated and proactive in influencing policies through the C9 platform and a cohesive group action to maximise chances of success and seek competitive advantages.

In 2011, for instance, a few C9 presidents from the seven suggested that they should co-sign and submit a joint letter to the MoE with recommendations on the new 2011 Scheme and other issues including increasing the government funding rate for each university student. One of the top two universities strongly disagreed and insisted that other national universities would have similar complaints and concerns, if not more than the C9 members, on these issues, hence the C9 should leave them with other universities to handle, as 'a larger crowd would make a louder noise'. It is worth noting that PKU and Tsinghua had received the highest level of funding rate per student in China. In the end, this lobbying proposal was dismissed by the two.

The coordination and effectiveness of the C9 were exacerbated by the lack of leadership and stability in the group, largely because of the governments' constraints over university leaderships and the group's formal presence (e.g. permanent secretariat). This is closely related to the political and regulatory restrictions which I mentioned earlier. For example, the central appointment system of university leaderships made the turnovers and tenures of university presidents unpredictable and irregular (see Chapter 2), causing disruptions to the universities' consistent policy strategies and hindering the group's joint plans and long-term commitments.

In addition, university leaders' work experience with the state and personal attributes (e.g. personality) influenced their decision-making and actual role in group lobbying.⁹³ For instance, some presidents had previously participated in the initial C9 meetings of the earlier years as the government's representatives from the State Council and the MoE before becoming C9 presidents themselves. They were the target of collective and individual lobbying by universities as government officials before moving to the 'other side'.⁹⁴ Many of these officials-turned-presidents were experienced and assertive about collective lobbying. However, during 2010–2014, many of these presidents left their positions, and their less experienced successors were more cautious about group lobbying, and avoided any risks of confrontation with the MoE. Their careers were controlled by the state, and their personal and professional relationships with officials were vital for their personal and institutional interests. Before investing in any joint action, these university presidents made careful assessment about the

⁹³ 'Face' (*mianzi* 面子) and peer pressure, for example, cornered a reluctant university president to agree to co-sign a C9 letter to the government on some policy issues, but his immediate successor has a stronger personality with a more sceptical view on collective actions. Since his appointment, he had skipped several group meetings and downplayed his university's role in this group.

⁹⁴ Here are some examples: before appointed as President of Zhejiang University in 2006, Professor Yang Wei (C9 Chair in 2008–2009, and again in 2012–2013) attended C9 meetings as head, the State Council Office of National Academic Degrees Committee (double as the MoE Department of Postgraduate Education). This is an influential governmental department, managing Chinese academic degrees, research programs, and some important funding projects, such as Projects 985 and 211. He served this government role from 2004–2006. After his term as ZJU President in 2006–2013 ended, Yang Wei moved back to the government and was appointed head of the National Science Foundation of China in 2013. As a new official, he again attended the C9 presidents' meeting in late 2013. Prior to becoming President of Fudan University in 2009, Professor Yang Yuliang (C9 Chair in 2010–2011) also attended C9 meetings as head, the State Council Office of National Academic Degrees Committee which he served in 2006–2009. Professor Zhou Qifeng formerly filled the same role in 2001–2004 before taking up the position of PKU President in 2008. Professor Zhang Jie, President of Shanghai Jiao Tong was formerly a head at the Chinese Academy of Sciences at the State Council during 2003–2006.

risks and consequences involved, including whether it would offend or upset the government, and what was the best and safest option for their universities' interest and their own careers.

As a result, the group lacked an effective leadership to carry out its collective plans. In 2012, the 'seven' C9 presidents agreed that a more coordinated action was necessary for policy advocacy. Despite the pushback of the MoE, they suggested that this group needed to set up 'a secretariat or a dedicated officer' in Beijing or Shanghai to facilitate government engagement and undertake 'scientific' intervention from the C9 in the form of data analysis, background reports and joint submissions. They even agreed on an annual budget and membership levies.⁹⁵ However, nobody raised a hand to take the lead or offer to follow up. The presidents had too much else to worry about. The plan faded away.

New challenges

The dynamics between the C9 and the MoE, and the ambivalent role of the MoE in this story leave many questions open. On one side, the MoE was instrumental in creating the C9 as its political ally; on the other, it remained increasingly sceptical and wary about its role.

It seems unlikely that the MoE will support the C9 to jointly lobby the leaders as it did in 2003–2004. In fact, recently the MoE has grown its power in the central structure. The national education budget officially reached 4% GDP in 2012, as a result of an increased policy focus on education. This has also started to alter the existing funding mechanism for education. The role played by the MoF and central leaders in decisions regarding education budget is destined to decline, while the MoE is set to become a more influential central decision-maker to drive the national education policies (see Chapter 4). In this new power structure, the MoE will be less likely to require political support and collaboration with influential universities. Rather, universities are likely to shift their lobbying focus and targets towards the MoE for more resources and favourable policy.

Moreover, new policy directions and contingencies may also affect joint group actions and the future development of the C9. University leaders I interviewed believe that the administration

⁹⁵ According to the discussion at the C9 presidents' meeting in 2012, the presidents agreed to provide the same membership levies (100,000 yuan each member per year): the money would come from university's own fund or other non-government sources; alumni donations could also be sourced; the small office would likely be established independently and separately in Shanghai or Beijing; one third of the running fund would go to the office rent; C9 might employ one or two dedicated staff; and the office would operate under the agreed C9 guideline and chair's supervision. The secretariat would regularly report to the current C9 chair and the executive committee; important group decisions would be informed and made by all the presidents; its secretariat might be named as 'Secretariat for Building World-class Universities Symposia', as opposed to 'C9 Secretariat' (to avoid tension).

and funding system for Project 985 and Project 211 are currently undergoing a reform and the central government intends to rebrand them as ‘program for building world-class universities’ (*yiliu daxue jianshe* 一流大学建设) and ‘program for building first-class academic disciplines’ (*yiliu xueke jianshe* 一流学科建设) respectively. This will likely diminish the brands of ‘985’ and ‘211’. If Project 985 is to be phased out one day, its demise is likely to disrupt the sustainability of the C9 and lead to a restructuring of its membership, priorities and strategies, unless these lobbying partners can renew their common policy agenda or find new common interests after ‘985’ becomes a fading memory. The fact that the C9 failed to produce concrete policy contributions to the competitive funding program 2011 Scheme may signal its limited common ground and shared interests outside of Project 985. This means that new power and policy structures may significantly shift the current interest alignment and interdependence amongst these universities. In that scenario, C9 members are likely to engage in increased competition and rivalry rather than collaborative lobbying for common interests. They will perhaps prioritise an individual, direct approach to the MoE.

While the C9 was exploring collaborative lobbying, the government was also practising how to deal with ‘potential challenges’ by powerful universities and maintain the sector in an acceptable order. For example, the government advised the universities that they are no longer allowed to name or promote themselves using ‘211’ and ‘985’ brands. After the new 2011 Scheme was officially announced in 2011, the MoE also issued a pre-warning, prohibiting all participating universities from identifying, branding or grouping themselves as ‘2011 universities’. This was to prevent the universities from repeating their practices during Projects 985 and 211. In September 2014, the State Council tightened up the rules in the policy trials of national student admissions, and suspended several self-initiated university coalitions of joint student recruitment (State Council, 2014; Guo Zhang, 2014).⁹⁶ These gestures may signal a

⁹⁶ Several university coalitions based on joint student recruitment policy trials (*Beiyue* (北约), *Huayue* (华约) and *Zhuoyue* (卓越)) (Zhe Zhang et al., 2010) and a few regional university associations in Beijing and Wuhan have emerged in the last few years, but none of these groups is linked to a policy lobbying function or possesses the same influence as the C9. Since late September 2014, the State Council has tightened up the rules regarding student recruitment trials and suspended all self-initiated university coalitions for their joint student testing and recruitment (State Council, 2014; Guo Zhang, 2014), because their collective policy ideas and activities have allegedly undermined government policies in the area of national student admissions and led to conflicts and chaos in the sector. For their latest development, see *China Youth Daily* (*zhongguo qingnian bao* 中国青年报) 29 November 2014 (Guo Zhang, 2014). The *Zhuoyue* coalition (formed by a number of engineering-intensive universities) has continued their collaboration in other areas and rebranded the group as ‘Excellence 10’ (Qian, 2014), but according to my interviewees, this group now mainly focuses on internal exchanges and resources sharing.

more restrictive political and regulatory environment for the development of interest groups like the C9.

In a constantly changing environment where global influence is increasing, will the C9 stay relevant and revitalise its lobbying desire and power at the next phase of Project 985? Or will the members go different directions, diminish their joint role and influence, and eventually fade out of the political arena? The Chinese government's scrutiny and disapproval towards group actions by universities is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The political, regulatory environment, the internal conflicts of the C9 group, and the latest education policy developments do not show a very promising prospect for this lobby coalition, unless circumstances (e.g. government regulations) drastically change. Yet, it might be premature to conclude that the C9 will be unable to exert its collective influence again, especially if new crises arise. If it is to exist, it is safe to predict that the C9 will most likely maintain its loose organisational form and a covert form of collective lobbying approach. My interviewees believe that it is perhaps the only way for this university interest group to survive and function. A university president said:

The C9 is a recognised, useful platform for its members to support and learn from each other. It is a group based on common interests, but in practice it has to exist and collaborate in a relatively loose and semi-formal structure due to political constraints. As for the future, we can only watch and see, and 'let nature take its course'.

Some university leaders have stayed hopeful and optimistic on the future of Chinese university coalitions. A president said:

Things in China take a long time to develop. During the significant social and economic transformation process in China, only a few [advocacy] groups can survive. Those that do survive may not be direct and aggressive like [groups] in Australia or the United States, but they will likely make a long-term contribution and impact.

Concluding remarks

The C9 is a significant, first-of-its-kind, lobby group in China's higher education sector. The C9 experience sheds light on how collective lobbying works in the university sector and on the limitations it has faced in the Chinese political context that eventually lead to its weakening.

Project 985 policies have served as a catalyst for collective lobbying actions by the nine universities. Their joint lobbying peaked at the times when the risk of political backlash was the greatest, and the need to do anything possible to influence the official decision-making was highest. The approach of the MoE in the central power structure was also instrumental in

the creation and efficacy of the C9 when the interests of the bureaucracy and those of the universities were aligned.

The story of the C9 is also, to a great extent, the story of Project 985. The universities saw an opportunity that required collaboration that much later led to the formalisation of the group. This origin also presented a substantial weakness and contributed to the temporary nature of the organisation. With the changing of political conditions and policy priorities, the C9 has found itself unable to adapt, with its universities reverting to their traditional individual lobbying.

Over the years, the C9 has seen mixed success in three common policy areas: concentrated funding, privileged policies, and formal grouping. Project 985 was extended several times, and provided significant support to the C9 members, but it was also broadened to other universities. The C9 members sought special policy advantages. They received higher research student admission quotas, and larger allocated numbers of government scholarships to send their PhD students to receive training overseas.⁹⁷ They were also allowed to recruit a larger quota of 'postgraduate admissions by recommendation with exam exemptions' (*tuijian mianshi yanjiusheng* 推荐免试研究生).⁹⁸ The C9 members, collectively and individually, initiated and led many new policy trials, which increased Chinese university autonomy in policy areas highly restrained by the government. Importantly, the C9 also successfully received tacit understanding from the government and established China's very first elite university league. The establishment of the C9 was regarded by many as an important and historical move for the increasingly ambitious Chinese universities, despite the growing constraints from the government, the lack of formalisation and the decline of joint actions, especially at the presidents' level, in the later years.

So how do the university leaders evaluate their group? The ones I interviewed have applauded the C9 and valued its potential. They believed that without the C9, they would be worse off. One university president pointed out that to a certain extent, their collective goals on some policy issues were achieved through the C9 group platform, because each year the presidents

⁹⁷ For instance, the C9 universities have received higher scholarship quotas from the China Scholarship Council (CSC). The CSC is China's most prestigious government scholarship agency (affiliated with the MoE), providing funding for Chinese students to study abroad and for overseas students to study in China at various degree levels.

⁹⁸ 'Postgraduate admissions by recommendation with exam exemptions' refers to a system that permits universities to select and admit a small number of bachelor degree graduates (from the same university or another university) to their postgraduate programs without requesting them to take the national standard postgraduate admissions examination. Eligible students should have received recommendations from their own institution, and obtained excellent academic records or other awards.

initiated the agenda, raised policy suggestions and made coordinated efforts to speak with the government on such occasions. The advocacy of the C9 meetings was heard by both government officials and the public. The C9 also established cooperation with research university groups from other countries, which raised the international recognition and reputation of the C9 institutions.

Additionally, the university leaders also highlighted their leading role and contributions to the wider sector and society as well as their public interest nature. I believe that their rhetoric and motivation are a mixture of sincere belief and strategic calculation. Undoubtedly, the C9 members mostly focused on their self-interested agenda to maintain a competitive advantage. However, these leading players' actions often brought about broader consequences and led to positive changes to the higher education sector and policy development trajectory, including on university funding policy and institutional autonomy reforms.

For example, they lobbied for Project 985 funding policy as they would be the most affected by its cancellation, but their efforts to sustain the program eventually benefited all '985' institutions. Moreover, the Shanghai Jiao Tong academic ranking system developed and publicised during the '985' lobbying process also greatly advanced China's longitudinal understanding and integration in the global higher education development. The C9's postgraduate self-selection recruitment trial soon expanded to improve other Chinese universities' research training capacity. In addition, the C9 coalition, as the first of its kind, set up a bold, innovative, and exemplary model of joint policy lobbying in the Chinese university sector.⁹⁹

Based on the above analysis, the C9 does represent a certain degree of public interest. As a president pointed out, as policy pioneers in the sector, the C9 universities need to take broader actors' interests into account. He said:

The higher one stands, the further one can see ... As university pioneers and reformers with a long-term vision and mission, we do look at the big picture, consider and address strategic, long-range and holistic issues. Many policy issues and directions we tried to influence were general and universal issues that affected and concerned many universities in the broader higher education community. We indeed have played an

⁹⁹ See Footnote 96. The *Zhuoyue* coalition (formed by a number of engineering-intensive universities) has established a group 'Excellence 10' (Qian, 2014), but this group mainly focuses on internal exchanges and resources sharing.

influential role in the sector, such as on the education policy reforms and the development of world-class universities.

Yet, one should also recognise that university lobbying is often a zero-sum game. Competition and inequity do exist between the C9 and other universities. Elite institutions in general have much more political access, leverage and resources than less prestigious institutions in the policy process. China's central bureaucratic system channels more advantages and opportunities to the former (see Chapter 5). Consequently, the interests of the latter may not be well represented in the policy debates, and hence tend to lose in the battles for education resources. For instance, some policies that C9 universities have collectively lobbied for, such as the concentration of funding on a few top players and privileged student admission quotas, would advantage themselves but perhaps damage lower-ranking universities' interests. A new, separate study may be needed in the future to probe the ongoing contention between elite and non-elite institutions, and assess how their relationships and strategies shape China's policymaking and the development of the tertiary education sector.

Implications of collective lobbying in China

What does the story of the C9 tell us about the lobbying of collective and particular interests in an authoritarian political environment? Under what conditions can non-government actors advance vested collective interests?

Collective lobbying is intended to add value and influence to the action of individual players in particular circumstances, to allow a combination of resources and to increase the power of persuasion, while providing greater visibility towards the general public. The experience of the C9 reveals, however, that collective lobbying is not necessarily an effective and accessible tool in the special Chinese political environment, and a group of nine is also not necessarily as effective and successful as the action of one or two players. There is a rather confined space for interest associations or policy advocacy groups in the system; and if they do operate, they likely play a weak role.

The state's suspicion and control, the lack of formalisation and leadership in the group, decreasing urgency for policy collaboration, and the conflicts between the C9 and other institutions, together with the C9 members' competition and dependence on the state, have all contributed over time to the weakening and vulnerability of the group and its lobbying activities.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ It is possible that other unknown aspects and back stories have contributed to the C9's decline, which could be further explored and revealed in future research.

However, if we take a deeper look, the powerful overarching political environment is the most salient factor that drives the decline and retreat of the C9 coalition. In many other countries, such as the US, the UK and Australia, it is common for similar universities to align interests and formalise coalitions despite their fierce competition, conflicts of interest and dependence on government funding. However, in China, the significant difference is the political system that inhibits and punishes the formalisation of advocacy coalitions. In this system, the alignment of interests around collective organisations in the university sector is subject to political restrictions and scrutiny. This is similar to what scholars have observed in other sectors (Cheng, 2006, pp. 47-48; Kennedy, 2009, pp. 213-214; Unger & Chan, 2008). The state controls universities' behaviour by controlling university leaders and their careers. They need to act discreetly for the interests of their university and themselves.

As a result, it is generally difficult for university coalitions, even the most powerful one(s), to produce significant change. 'Collective action' remains a controversial *modus operandi* for universities as for other sectors of society. In this respect, the elite Chinese universities have shown a similar preference and attitude towards collective strategies as large businesses have for trade associations. They typically focus on direct interactions with government officials and have limited involvement in collective lobbying. Nevertheless, the factors shaping the elite universities' choices on their interest alignment and joint lobbying differ from the ones for businesses. Businesses are largely affected by their economic circumstances, possibly more than they are by their political context (Kennedy, 2008, p. 164). However, the political and regulatory factors seem to have played a much greater role in universities' choices and practices. After all, these universities are more proximate to the central bureaucracy, and considerably more distant from the market. Their academic and economic success, relative autonomy, and competitive advantages mostly depend on the state which determines their destiny.

Here I identify three important factors shaping the C9's lobbying outcomes and practices.

First, in the highly fragmented central bureaucracy, the changing dynamics within the internal power structure to a certain extent explains C9's rise and fall, and affects the C9's interest alignments and lobbying actions. For instance, the evolving role and power status of the MoE in the central political power structure determined the increase or the reduction of its support to C9, and shifted the C9's main lobbying target from the central leaders to the MoE. This highlights the existing political imperatives that universities need to deal with—it is the political master who has the last word.

Second, the regulatory environment remains highly rigid. It does not support a sufficient level of autonomy and independence or an open, bottom-up advocacy dialogue in the sector. The formalisation of interest alignments and collective actions is scrutinised and inhibited by the central authority. University leaders have to be particularly cautious due to their institutions' dependence on the government, and state-controlled personal careers. Similar to trade associations and companies, universities mostly avoid challenging the government's authority. Deference to the state and seeking win-win situations remain the most common strategy (Kennedy, 2008, p. 164).

Third, specific contingent circumstances (crises) produce political opportunities for interest alignment and joint actions. In the highly rigid environment, taking advantage of or reacting to the contingencies becomes crucial for any effective collective decisions and actions. Agents seize specific opportunities (or react to major threats and crises) and rapidly align their interests to advance their collective interests. A particular interesting example: when facing the Project 985 crisis in 2003, the MoE went against its normal preferences and aligned its interest with the C9. Other examples include the joint lobbying of PKU and Tsinghua on Project 985 in 1998, as well as the joint decisions of the C9 to act on the second and third funding rounds of Project 985 in 2003 and 2009–2010 respectively.

These three key factors have shaped the C9's practices and outcomes. They also highlight this interest alliance's unstructured and issue-based nature (Watson, 2008, p. 39): it is more a consequence of a social movement over specific issues and power relationships under certain circumstances, rather than a structured, consolidated framework of interest alignment.

The C9's significant experience and influence may appear to some as suggesting a potential structural change in government–university relations. However, the C9 members rapidly returned to the norm (individual action), and the MoE quickly returned to the priority of strengthening its authority and restricting university activism (after supporting the creation of the C9 at a time when their interests aligned). This proves the difficulties of continuing open and collective lobbying efforts. Nevertheless, given the rapid development of the national circumstances, alliances are still possible. Chinese universities may seize or produce other opportunities to align their interests and exert influence on policies. However, the experience of the C9 casts a pessimistic shadow on the possibility of collectiveness ever becoming the norm.

The next chapter focuses on the prevalence and general practices of university lobbying, which is mostly individual, self-focused in nature.

Chapter 4—Going solo: universities pursuing individual interests

Governments represent either a threat or an opportunity to organisations. Lobbying is all about acquiring—or maintaining—a competitive advantage.

Lionel Zetter (2011, p. 29)

Introduction

Lobbying is a commonly known concept in western countries, although no definitive definition of lobbying has ever been agreed upon (Zetter, 2011, pp. 3,29). The UK Public Affairs Council (UKPAC), for instance, broadly defines lobbying as ‘in a professional capacity, attempting to influence, or advising those who wish to influence, the Government, Parliament, the devolved legislatures or administrations, regional or local government or other public bodies on any matter within their competence’ (UKPAC, 2010).

A range of scholars who studied the lobbying behaviour of Chinese businesses and industries have broadly defined ‘lobbying’, or its Chinese word *youshui* (游说), as activities undertaken to influence officials’ views, decisions and actions regarding government regulations and policies (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, pp. 101-102; Z. Tian & Gao, 2006, pp. 560-568, 579). So how do the leading Chinese research universities understand and interpret *youshui*?

In this political system, *youshui* is neither regulated or legitimised (Cheng, 2006, pp. 47-48; S. He, 2009, p. 8; Yue Wang, 2008, p. 40), nor openly discussed by government or academic leaders. Nevertheless, according to the numerous university executives I interviewed, lobbying behaviour ‘widely exists in every aspect of society in China’, including in the higher education sector. The leading national research universities proactively engage with the government and conduct full-fledged lobbying activities, attempting to influence higher education policies and to seek competitive advantages in autonomy and funding.

So how is lobbying generally being practised by the universities? What role(s) does lobbying play in university–government interactions? How often do universities lobby collaboratively? How do they understand the complex central bureaucracy and exploit it through lobbying? Which state actors in the system are their major targets and how do universities identify and interact with lobbying targets in the fragmented structure? This chapter addresses these questions.

In this chapter, I first present the salient characteristics of universities' general lobbying practices, including their common perceptions, language, frequency, organisational forms of agency, and targets for lobbying. I illustrate why lobbying is so prevalent and widely considered as a vital and expedient component of university–government relationships; why universities strategically choose to camouflage or even avoid open discussions around their lobbying behaviour; as well as why interest alignment and organised, collective actions remain rare in the university sector (in contrast to the collective group of C9 illustrated in the previous chapter). I will then provide examples of how universities understand and exploit the fragmented, hierarchical and opaque central bureaucracy, identify their various lobbying targets (crucial central decision-makers) within the system, and interact with these state actors to seek opportunities and exert their influence. Universities' capacity to successfully produce opportunities and influence often largely depends on how well they understand and exploit the fissures within the system. Universities constantly monitor the central bureaucracy to gain a clear sight of opportunities and adopt tactics to promote their interests.

Decoding 'university lobbying': practice versus expression

To begin with, how do universities interpret *youshui* and its practices in the higher education sector? A simple and common definition of *youshui* by my interviewees is 'a bottom-up attempt or action to influence government officials and shape governmental decisions on certain issues of interest'. The word 'bottom-up' highlights the hierarchical nature in university–government relationships. In some interviewees' view, *youshui* also refers to influencing a broader range of actors, including media, the general public and local communities. As a university president suggested, universities may, and should, *youshui* society, because it is important to 'raise people's understanding about universities' roles and contributions to the nation and seek their support'. In practice, however, *youshui* mostly targets the government. The engagement with media and the public often serves as a strategy for universities to attract attention and support from government leaders and officials.

A large number of university leaders I spoke to view *youshui* positively and label it as 'natural and logical behaviour' and a 'global practice', which ensures 'a balanced two-way flow of information (*xinxi duichen* 信息对称) between universities and the government', and 'delivers the views of universities to the state officials directly'. Especially, it provides both sides with, as one associate president described, 'a capacity to raise concerns, seek solutions and resolve conflicts long before they become serious or go public'. A university president said, '*Youshui* is well established and well developed in China. Through the practices of *youshui*, our voice, feedback and ideas are able to reach the government officials regularly.' My interviewees also hold a unanimous and firm opinion that 'every university lobbies', especially the leading

research universities that require continuous policy and funding support and need to monitor and explore opportunities on a broad variety of policies.¹⁰¹

As I illustrated in Chapter 1, formal channels of policy communications are typically top-down and led by the government; and there is a lack of legitimate spaces and formal institutions for bottom-up initiatives where universities can be policy advocates and lobbyists. Attempts at policy influencing and seeking competitive advantages have been driven to various informal tactics and behind-the-scenes, covert interactions due to the political constraints. A university president said:

Lobbying is extremely important and common ... Taking my university as an example, we lobby the government almost on a daily basis for various matters and at various levels of personnel ... Personally, I have meetings with senior government officials two or three times per week for funding policies. This is what we call 'visiting the ministries to cash in' (*paobu qianjin* 跑部钱进).¹⁰²

Within the government, competitive allocations of funding resources are often controlled by different government bureaux and divisions as well as individual personnel within those bureaux. This allows space for manipulation and game playing. To influence government decisions and seek financial interests, universities have to actively lobby the bureaucracies and officials. For example, in 2012, the government developed a special elite program. The aim was to select the best five national institutions in science and fund their training of young talents in basic science. Due to the considerable investment attached to the program, numerous national universities mobilised their special connections within the government and lobbied individual officials for 'a special consideration'. A few months later, 17 universities of various ranking managed to secure a funding place in this previously 'exclusive' program. Several interviewees told me that 'this happens nearly every time when there is a funding opportunity'.

¹⁰¹ A few interviewees also suggested that besides leading research universities, the second and third-tier institutions are also active lobbyists for government funding. They are unable to compete with top players on performance and quality, so they often rely on informal lobbying and expedient means, such as personal connections and nepotism, to seek policy favours and compensate their disadvantages in national competition for funding. As explained in the Introduction, comparing the lobbying practices by different types of universities is not a focus of this thesis, however, it may be an interesting area for future research.

¹⁰² This is a word play on the original expression of 'fast steps to move forward!' with the character for 'step' (*bu* 步) being replaced by 'ministry' (*bu* 部) and the character for 'forward' (*qian* 前) being replaced by 'money' (*qian* 钱).

Nevertheless, despite its prevalence, university lobbying is typically couched in non-political and non-confrontational terms, and many people in fact avoid using the word *youshui* in formal conversations or in writing.¹⁰³ More neutral terms are frequently applied to describe a lobbying process, such as ‘policy interactions’ (*zhengce hudong* 政策互动), ‘participation in policy discussions’, ‘exchanging views’, ‘providing policy feedback’, ‘bottom-up reporting’ (*xiang shangji huibao gongzuo* 向上级汇报工作), ‘university–government communications’, and even ‘providing services to the government’. This is similar to what Shu He has observed: many tertiary institutions set up offices in Beijing to facilitate their lobbying of the government, but these offices are ambiguously labelled as ‘managing relations with government’ (*zhengfu gongguan* 政府公关) (S. He, 2009, p. 8). Why?

One explanation provided by some interviewees is that *youshui* is not an idiomatic word in China thus is not widely understood or used. They have argued that it is a newly introduced, foreign term translated from the English word ‘lobbying’.¹⁰⁴ A university president also suggested that *youshui* is an informal, colloquial expression which is never used in the official language.

Another more plausible explanation offered by my interviewees is that *youshui* is a sensitive topic in the Chinese political context: this is neither ‘a legitimate form of policy communication’ nor ‘something that people bring up to the table for open discussions’, despite its common existence. The popular understanding amongst interviewees is that the state does have ‘an aversion to bottom-up initiatives’ (Zheng, 2010, p. 143), which may ‘undermine its paramount authority’ and ‘permit greater social activism’. In particular, the government does not wish to be subject to influence or appear vulnerable, hence it is vigilant and hostile towards explicit, open lobbying attempts. One interviewee commented:

Youshui plays an important role in university–government relations, and the government knows that it can be influenced through *youshui*. But it will never admit to it, or use the expression *youshui*. The state maintains that its authority is not subject to influence. It dislikes to show any signs of vulnerability and susceptibility. It likes to suggest that all great new policy ideas originate from the government, even though it is universities that often come up with innovative proposals.

¹⁰³ A few interviewees were hesitant to discuss it in the beginning of my interviews.

¹⁰⁴ In fact, the concept of *youshui* has long existed in China, and can be traced back to the diplomatic and military policy strategy of interest alliance ‘*hezong lianheng*’ (合纵连横) practised 2,500 years ago during the Warring States period.

However, according to my interviewees, the government informally accommodates universities' behind-the-scenes lobbying behaviour, and appears comfortable labelling and treating it as part of 'bottom-up reporting', which is 'familiar and acceptable to both government officials and universities'. Consequently, universities desensitise and legitimise their lobbying interactions and mitigate political risks by adopting expressions that relate to acceptable bureaucratic practices.

A third explanation by my interviewees is that *youshui* carries negative connotations in Chinese society because of its mercantile origin, which is often associated with profit-driven, selfish interest groups, and shady, unethical conduct. Earlier studies on interest groups in China have shown that lobbying practices often involve clientelism, rent-seeking, nepotism or even corruption (Cheng, 2006, pp. 45-46, 48; Cheng et al., 2003, pp. 66-70; H. Liu, 2006, pp. 53-54; Z. Tian & Gao, 2006, pp. 563-564, 566; W. Yan, 2009, pp. 77-78; Jing Yang, 2010, pp. 152-153; Q. Zhu, 2011, pp. 34-35). Universities want to distance themselves from this bad reputation, although their closed-door *youshui* practices may sometimes involve 'shady business' and unethical behaviour. A university's vice president confessed to me that universities are sensitive and reluctant to relate their practices to *youshui* or discuss their acts, especially when they did something 'below the belt' and 'cannot discuss it on the table'.

I find that the second and third explanations are more convincing for the restrained expression about *youshui*. Universities conceal their lobbying behaviour or intention. They avoid describing their activities as 'lobbying' or tagging themselves as part of 'interest groups' in order to avoid political sensitivity and negative connotations.

Acting alone: the avoidance of collective lobbying

In her book *Lobbying for Higher Education*, Constance Ewing Cook (1998, p. 141) suggests that in the US, higher education does two types of lobbying. One is generic, pro-education lobbying which is commonly conducted by coalitions of institutions and associations. The other is purely selfish and conducted individually (e.g., lobbying by a single institution for earmarked funding for its own use). This statement does not fully apply to China: Chinese universities rely on private, individual and direct interactions with the officialdom for both their self-interested agenda and for the broad, big-picture policies that affect them all.

Leading Chinese national universities do meet regularly to exchange policy views and strategies on in-principle and pro-education issues of shared interests, such as university autonomy on fund spending, student admissions, academic programs and degrees, and the government's funding for research overheads or the average education expenditure for each university student. However, institutions typically avoid forming policy allies or undertaking

joint actions on these common issues. Lobby coalitions only emerge under special circumstances for certain issues amongst a small number of elite players, such as Tsinghua and PKU.¹⁰⁵ Taking the C9 as an example (Chapter 3): the C9 members share many common concerns and collective interests; they coordinated their lobbying efforts when facing critical crises; and the institutionalisation of this lobby group has seemed to emerge. However, my C9 interviewees admitted to me that they only conducted organised, joint policy work ‘once in a blue moon’—they act alone most of the time.

Two main factors seem to explain such patterns of practice.

Intense competition, self-interested focus and conflicted needs

Individual lobbying of a private, covert nature is a popular form of promotion with which Chinese universities have become very familiar when their self-interests are at stake. Universities work in an extremely competitive sector and are under constant pressure to increase productivity and perform well. Their quality and performance are measured by the government through merit-based indicators, such as rankings in the national discipline-based evaluations (conducted by the MoE), numerical counting of published articles in MoE-selected journals, and the receipt of government grants, funding programs and national awards.¹⁰⁶ High yields in these areas in turn boost their status, reputation and influence, increase their success of receiving further financial resources, and improve their competitive recruitment of quality students. While racing to raise their quality, outputs and competitiveness, universities have developed a strong sense of vigilance, rivalry, self-interested focus, and a high proactivity to seek competitive advantages. A university executive suggested:

¹⁰⁵ A rare example of successful coordinated lobbying is the alliance between the elite Tsinghua University and Peking University. They jointly lobby the state on a wide range of policy issues that affect and concern them both. Despite their fierce competition on nearly every aspect of their activities, they often have to put their differences aside and work together to achieve shared goals and resolve issues of common interest. Jointly, they have made impacts on some significant higher education policies, including Project 985, 2011 Scheme and Young 1000 Talents Plan. They have also jointly initiated and led a number of new policy experiments, such as the first Chinese joint degree programs (with overseas institutions) and innovative research training strategies. On one occasion reported by my interviewees, PKU and Tsinghua successfully sought an unprecedented approval from the state to conduct a first-of-its-kind trial to accredit and issue their own academic degrees in 2015 without going through the government’s accreditation process. Although the two universities still remain subject to the government’s audits during the trial, it is still a significant step given the government’s strict control over all university academic degrees in China.

¹⁰⁶ National prestigious awards, for instance, include ‘Excellent undergraduate teaching and learning reform’ (*benke jiaoxue gaige jiang* 本科教学改革奖) and ‘Top 100 outstanding doctoral dissertations’ (*baipian youxiu boshi lunwen pingxuan* 百篇优秀博士论文评选).

It is very common that a few elite universities compete for one funding program, and they spare no effort to win the game and interact with government officials separately and privately. Last time, our university quietly submitted a policy proposal to the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) making policy recommendations on a new national science project. If our proposal was adopted by the NDRC, we would have a better chance of winning a funding place [under this project]. [Another university D] received intelligence from the government about our good plan, and also secretly submitted a counter-proposal to the NDRC based on their own strengths, needs and interest ... Competition and individual lobbying like this happen frequently.

In particular, as I earlier mentioned, decisions on government funding programs and awards may be subject to personal discretion, manipulation and game playing, it is common for university leaders and personnel to lobby the relevant authorities and officials that manage these programs or process their project applications. They often seek the economic interests of their own universities, special privileges, favourable votes, and earmarked opportunities, such as investment funds for new infrastructure on their campus or obtaining special intelligence on a new source of revenue. Personal and informal factors play an important role in such private interactions (see Chapter 5).

Competition in other policy areas, such as student admissions, is also invariably a zero-sum game for national universities: there are only a certain number of quality student applicants each year; one's loss is another's gain; and the government decides on how many students are allocated to each university (fixed percentage and capped student numbers for each province). Therefore, the universities actively lobby the government individually to explore the 'flexible components' (*jidong yuansu* 机动元素) of the policy and optimise their game in student recruitment.¹⁰⁷

So what about the big-picture, general policy issues about which the universities share similar concerns and common ground? An interviewee made the following observation:

On important broad national policy issues, university presidents sometimes meet in person and advocate the same view. They all agree to say something similar to the government. However, when they really meet with individual government divisions and

¹⁰⁷ As mentioned in Chapter 2, the government's policy on national postgraduate student recruitment quota, for instance, contains rigid rules and fixed recruitment quotas for each university, as well as some 'flexible components', such as a special annual percentage for 'recruitment of students by recommendation (instead of standard exams)'.

officials in private, their words are likely to be inconsistent and different, reflecting their own needs and interests first.

Another university executive said:

Everyone is focusing on their own business first. Their own agenda and needs are always more important and urgent than the collective or others' needs. University leaders have to think twice before investing too much energy on collective activities.

Different priorities and needs often prevent universities from forming consensus and taking joint actions. C9 member universities X and Y, for example, are both leading national research universities and funding recipients under Projects 985 and 211. As partners and collaborators, they share the goal of 'building world-class universities' and face similar policy challenges and concerns, so they often meet to exchange ideas and experiences. Both universities strongly agree that key development funding schemes such as Projects 985 and 211 policies should be long-term commitments from the central government. Yet, X advocates that 985/211 funds should move away from the current priority setting for specific research fields, so that universities can build upon their historic strengths and develop freely without being constrained by the government's short-term goals, and they can also gain the security, stability and flexibility to fully decide on how and where to spend the money, such as infrastructure development and overheads. Y, on the other hand, believes that the priority-setting strategy works better for the 985/211 policies. In its view, national funding should be concentrated on selected, key priority areas to favour rapid development in targeted areas.

Essentially, their split opinions are the result of their different research strengths and development strategies. X excels in basic sciences and humanities which research fields have not been a funding priority for a few decades. Y focuses on engineering and technology fields which are well funded by the government as high-priority areas. Both universities prefer a funding model that best suits their own needs and provides the most financial support. X and Y are keen to lobby the central government for a long-term, sustainable set of Projects 985 and 211 policies, but they are unable to form a consensus or collaboration on this funding allocation policy, even though they belong to the same lobby group.

The story of the 'Association of Chinese Research Universities' is another example of how a potential lobby group misfired because universities failed to establish common grounds and strategies. In 2007–2008, China's Renmin University in Beijing invited 15–20 leading national research universities in China to join and establish a self-initiated, autonomous 'Association of Chinese Research Universities' (ACRU). According to Renmin University, this new group aimed to represent the 'common interests' of its members and serve as a 'communication platform'

between the elite research universities and the government. It intended to submit joint proposals to the government, provide higher education policy advice, and help the government hear universities' voices on their development needs and reduce the government's micromanagement and over-supervision (Juan Hu et al., 2007; Ji, 2008). In other words, the proposed ACRU would operate in a form of 'higher education lobby group' of research universities.

The then President of Renmin University worked at the MoE as head of a division before moving to the university. He believed his connections with the MoE officials and national universities would facilitate the establishment of this coalition. He selected and invited a number of universities based on some self-developed membership criteria. However, the so-called ACRU group was discontinued after only two meetings. According to interviewees who were involved in the ACRU, it fell apart largely because of the lack of support and enthusiasm from peer universities. One university's vice president said:

Renmin University is a university of humanities and social sciences. Some other more comprehensive research universities with strong sciences and engineering focus found that they had significant differences in terms of their development vision, background, priorities and strategies. Besides, some universities did not agree with the 'membership criteria' independently developed by Renmin University in the first place. So there was not enough common ground, interests, or urgency to sustain the group.

A political and regulatory environment inhibiting collective lobbying

Most of the university executives that I interviewed envisaged that a collective voice and position is likely to add value and influence. However, they also pointed out that even if there is a genuine consensus and desire to act on issues of shared interest, individual lobbying still 'fits better' and 'is more practical' in the Chinese political system. Why?

First, in a structural sense, universities are individually sponsored and supervised by various central ministries and agencies, such as the MoE, CAS, and MIIT. They need to conduct separate internal reporting and negotiations with their own central supervisors on major policy issues. This system creates structural barriers and fragmentation amongst national universities and discourages them from dealing with the government collectively, which often turns issues of common interest into individual, isolated lobbying of different authorities and central supervisors. In short, central fragmentation divides universities.

Second, it is a unanimous view amongst university executives I spoke to that interest coalitions and collective lobbying by universities are 'sensitive, delicate matters' in the Chinese political

system and higher education regulatory environment, facing scrutiny and suppression by the government, hence are 'difficult to establish or operate'.¹⁰⁸ One interviewee said:

Joint lobbying by a few Chinese universities, such as signing joint policy petitions, is the most sensitive, difficult and challenging [form of agency]. 'Huddling down below' is what the government fears and opposes the most.

A university president pointed out:

It is not a big deal if one university president writes to the government. If both Peking and Tsinghua presidents submit a jointly signed letter, the pressure [on the government] will be a lot greater. If nine or ten national leading university presidents jointly sign and submit a letter, it will become a matter of great significance ... The central authority does not wish to see bottom-up communications in such a 'confrontational, threatening' form ... A university coalition or interest group can only survive if it operates informally and does not define itself a 'lobby group'.

A government official also told me that allowing 'an independent interest group' is almost equivalent to allowing 'separation from the central control' (*gao fenlie* 搞分裂) and a 'small gang' (*gao xiaotuantu* 搞小团体). State officials remain cautious and wary about a joint voice and united policy front by prestigious institutions, as this may lead to potential political challenge and negative consequences. They fear that interest group(s) composed of powerful players may hinder, confront, withstand, resist, and undermine their authority. Therefore, the government has maintained its tight control and regulations over collective actions and interest coalitions in the higher education sector.

As noted in previous chapters, the higher education sector has produced some loosely organised university coalitions and forums, such as the government-initiated council of deans of graduate schools, several self-initiated student recruitment university coalitions (see Footnote 96), and a few regional university associations in Beijing and Wuhan. Their bottom-up policy lobby function is strictly limited. The government only legitimises them as civil platforms for inter-university collaboration that are subject to the central authority, and sometimes takes advantage of them to distribute policies or collect information from institutions.

¹⁰⁸ In this thesis, an interest coalition by universities or an education interest group can be generally defined as a coalition or multiple coalitions with common goals and interests; It is an organisation (or a potential organisation) influencing (or hoping to influence) public education policy and receive benefits through its interest expression to the government or legislators.

Such patterns of interaction resonate with the other areas of China. In the corporatist structures of the Chinese state, associations or groups in important areas of economic and societal activity are subject to state's tight control (Unger & Chan, 2008, pp. 66-68). Interest groups face legitimacy crisis and lack independence and autonomy (Cheng, 2006, pp. 44,47-48; Cheng et al., 2003, p. 63; Kennedy, 2009, pp. 213-214).

University leaders are well aware of the political sensitivity of interest coalitions and advocacy groups, hence they carefully avoid formalising their lobbying collaboration. One university president told me that a decade ago, he met a few other presidents from leading research universities in private, and talked about forming a coalition of like-minded universities. At the end of the deliberation, they all agreed that it was too sensitive and could not fit in the Chinese political system.

Consider the C9's experience as an example. As illustrated in Chapter 3, although C9 members play an important role in many national policies and have an increasing international reputation and profile, the government has shown an increasingly sceptical attitude towards the group. It did not want the C9 to operate more formally or autonomously, and it refused to engage with the C9 when it attempted to initiate a bottom-up policy dialogue. To date, the C9 is still not a legally registered 'civil organisation' (*minjian zuzhi* 民间组织) in China.

In addition, the government-appointed university leaders often tread cautiously to protect their universities' interest as well as their personal interests. As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, through its *nomenklatura* system (Zheng, 2010, pp. 103-107),¹⁰⁹ the party-state has a final say over personnel decisions of all important positions, including university presidents and party secretaries. The state controls university leaders' careers, and it is able to retire, or even forcefully remove, those who disobey (Zheng, 2010, pp. 103-107): such disciplinary measures can severely dampen academic or professional careers. This system greatly influences university executives' decisions and strategies. University leaders I interviewed admitted that they need to behave deferentially and maintain good personal relationships with senior central officials. For instance, they avoid dissent or critical language and tone when raising concerns. A vice university president said:

It is very important for the MoE leaders to maintain a good personal impression about us [leaders of national universities]. When we want to propose changes or new ideas, we have to consider beforehand whether the officials had thought about them and may be inclined to accept or tolerate them. One would not want to bring up difficult

¹⁰⁹ See Footnote 52.

questions that put them under pressure or make them feel uncomfortable and challenged ... that may create problems later on.

A number of interviewees made similar observations that some university presidents prioritised their own personal interests over that of the university when facing political risks. One said, 'It [a lobbying attempt] always becomes more complicated when it goes to the presidents' level because of their position and potential risks'.

For instance, in 2009–2010, the nine deans of graduate studies of the C9 universities drafted a joint proposal on postgraduate admissions and funding policies. They asked their presidents to approve and sign their names before submitting it to the government. One university president refused to sign, insisting that this 'group action' resembled 'forming a clique', which would put too much political pressure on the MoE officials.

In another case I have discussed in Chapter 3, a university president pulled out from a joint C9 submission at the last minute and abruptly prevented the letter from going out to the government. He later explained to another president that he did not want them to 'take the risk of offending the MoE', which might lead to political reprisals and strategic suicide for the group, universities and their careers. He said to the other president: 'This is for your own interest ... If we do so, how would the MoE officials react? Have you thought about the potential consequences!?'

An alternative strategy: coordinated but separated lobbying activities

Collective actions by universities remain difficult. However, there is an alternative strategy to work together and 'coordinate lobbying' towards the same goal. When a number of institutions form a consensus on a policy matter, they may coordinate their individual advocacy and efforts by communicating simultaneously and separately with officials on the same issue. As an interviewee suggests, if there are some shared concerns on a complicated and significant policy issue, C9 members will first try to lobby the government 'separately and simultaneously over a period of time' and 'see how it goes'. The C9 deans of graduate studies, for instance, have often used this strategy over the years. One dean said:

We sometimes lobby the government on one specific issue individually, simultaneously, and persistently. If several institutions try to raise and influence the same issue, after receiving a number of complaints from various stakeholders, the government will start to see the problem and reconsider the policy.

In one vice president's words, 'a quantitative change can eventually make a qualitative change (*liangbian dao zhibian* 量变到质变)'. For example, in the last few years, a handful of research

universities simultaneously complained to the MoST about its research grants policy concerning fund management, overhead charges, performance evaluation and staff reward/penalty system, calling for a review of the policy. Due to the repeated, separate lobbying efforts by various institutions on this issue, the MoST finally accepted that the existing research funding policy for competitive grants was flawed. The MoST officials undertook inspection visits to a number of national universities in 2012–2013 and held meetings with university staff to collect proposals and recommendations, with the aim of reforming the relevant policies and fixing the loopholes.

Although this interesting approach may help universities achieve their goals from time to time, it remains weak and unlikely to evolve into powerful formal alliances. More often than not, their ‘coordinated actions’ merely means ‘lobbying separately and simultaneously on the same issue of shared concerns and advocacy’ rather than ‘forming allies and taking concrete, joint actions’.

A multi-player game: identifying lobbying targets within a fragmented, hierarchical and opaque central bureaucracy

So far, I have illustrated some general characteristics of university lobbying, including common perceptions, language of *youshui*, frequent practices, and organisational forms of actions. So given their perceived importance and effectiveness in lobbying the central government, how do universities understand the complex central bureaucratic system, in which state actors are their major lobbying targets, and how do universities identify targets in this structure and interact with them to exert influence?

The opaque and fragmented political and regulatory environment offers hidden space and opportunities, and the capacity of universities to advance their interests often depends on their ability to monitor, understand and exploit the fissures in the system. An interviewee shared with me his insights and experience:

Generally speaking, there are always possibilities and loopholes [in the central system] for a university to seek preferential treatment and advance its interests. More policy issues are opening up for discussion and negotiation ... In today’s situation, universities can lobby on most policy issues as long as the fundamental and sensitive issues remain unchallenged, such as the party leadership of universities.

For instance, when several peer universities enter a competition for winning a place under a national funding program, one institution can access relevant government authorities through its informal networks to obtain special assistance and confidential information such as the

composition of the selection panel. The institution may then court the panel members individually to influence their votes. Such borderline corrupt cases 'happen more often than one thinks', according to my interviewees. Personal connections and discretions, informality and game playing still play an important role in manipulating the system and influencing the government's decisions (I will discuss further on this topic in Chapter 5).

As I illustrated in Chapter 1, despite an important role in managing education and supervising universities, the MoE is only one of the many players, often restricted by the intervention of other organs on higher education policies (Jupeng Yang & Su, 2012, p. 57). A range of decision-makers and central organs are involved in national education and research policies, and they may present various resources and funding opportunities for universities. Therefore, besides the MoE and their primary sponsoring ministries, national universities need to interact directly or indirectly with any other parts of the central bureaucracy which have responsibilities and powers over specific policy issues. For instance, universities make frequent contacts with the MoST on spending policies of some major university research grants.

Universities are often skilled operators led by experienced insiders to this complex network.¹¹⁰ My interviewees paint a picture of the central system characterised by fragmentation, rivalry and hierarchy of central players as well as the paramount authority of top leaders. These important features not only help highlight the key decision-makers for various policy matters, but also have played an important role in shaping universities' strategies for dealing with individual central players. Universities maintain a clear understanding and close view of what is happening in the system and where the opportunities are.

Fragmentation and rivalry

The central bureaucracy is highly fragmented and its governmental organs are poorly coordinated. Each central ministry or agency of an equivalent rank, such as the MoE, CAS and MIIT, may administer certain policy areas and distribute resources for various uses that universities can seek access to. However, these agencies are not necessarily coordinated and their scopes of management sometimes overlap.

The party-state leads China's education, science and research development through the Leading Small Group on Science, Technology and Education (LSGSTE) at the State Council. However, despite its alleged leadership over the national educational bureaucracy, in reality

¹¹⁰ As mentioned in the earlier chapters, many university leaders of leading institutions are former public servants, so they generally have already developed interpersonal networks within the government and sound knowledge of how the bureaucracy works (e.g. central politics and power structure for resources). For specific examples, see Footnote 94.

the LSGSTE has neither fully functioned in macro-level coordination between central agencies, nor involved itself in the central financial budgeting process. It has never issued an official document in its own name. Although the LSGSTE is chaired by the Premier, the issues on science, technology innovation and education are less important than others in his portfolio. Real leadership is normally held by a vice premier or state councillor, who may also have other priorities. The LSGSTE is run by a Secretariat under the General Office of the State Council, which also has many other responsibilities, with neither sufficient manpower nor incentives to coordinate. As a result, direct responsibility for science, technology and education policies is stretched across many ministries or ministry level agencies under the State Council, each with the power to propose and administer national programs under its jurisdiction, and with a budget directly allocated by the MoF. There is no uniform, national quality control standard, nor is there much exchange of information about projects funded across different agencies (Cao, Li, Li, & Liu, 2013, p. 460).

The central government has adopted a 'countersigning system' (*huiqianzhi* 会签制) to improve its internal coordination and accountability and to achieve agreement among an array of bodies.¹¹¹ The 'countersigning system' refers to a bureaucratic process that requires all the relevant central ministries to approve, sign off, or stamp an official document before it takes effect.¹¹² However, in this deeply fragmented system, the 'countersigning system' only addresses superficial problems while adding more tasks and complications to the decision-making process. As a university vice president suggested, when each matter has to go through and be approved by so many ministries, it often enters a limbo. Each ministry has its own interest, priority and understanding on a certain matter, and does not necessarily liaise or consult with others. It is difficult to achieve a good outcome, and many project proposals submitted by his university have drifted away and were never completed.

Meanwhile, ministries and agencies at the same administrative rank within the central bureaucracy often have conflicts of interest and develop rivalries. Central ministries regularly

¹¹¹ The bureaucratic system of Chinese 'countersigning system' also enables some institutions to gain more political power. The Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), for instance, now has a special project approval authority (*xiangmu shenpiquan* 项目审批权) role to sign off many national projects, because one will need MEP's official stamp during the establishment and conclusion of a project in order to complete a project. As a result, MEP has gained an increase in power.

¹¹² A vice president gave me an example of a university research project that he managed. The '*huiqian*' system for his project involved a number of central bodies, including the NDRC, MIIT, MOST, MoE, as well as the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT), the Quality Supervision Bureau, and the Intellectual Property Office (IPO).

compete with each other for resources, influence of portfolio, performance ratings, and especially, the leadership and decision-making authority (*qiantou bumen* 牵头部门) over key national development and special funding projects (*zhongda zhuanxiang* 重大专项), which is determined by the State Council. A university executive recently observed that some MoST officials 'got really upset' that the MIIT won the competition to manage several new technology programs, because this defeat 'downgraded the MoST from a leading to a mere supervisory body (*jiandu bumen* 监督部门)'. So why is it so important?

Managing more programs means gaining more money, power, influence and a higher profile in the central system. Generally speaking, once a national Research and Development (R&D) program is established and funded, the managing (leading) organ handles the implementation of the program on its own, such as calling for proposals and organising assessments and selections, and exercising executive power on project establishment, approval, recipients and amounts of funding.

These decisions are crucial to universities, and knowing where the final authority lies is of the greatest importance. The MoST, for instance, is in direct control over a large amount of national science and research expenditure funds due to its portfolio of science and technology and its ownership of a range of major programs. Because the considerable resources and policies are under its own administration, the MoST is often a lobbying target that universities interact with regularly.

Universities are not only well aware of the fragmented structure of the central bureaucracy, but also adapt themselves to its structure. Universities try to exploit the fragmented and competitive nature, and focus on various lobbying targets simultaneously to maximise their chances of success. A key national university C, for instance, actively monitors and engages with multiple central agencies, such as the MoE, NDRC and CAS. The Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) in recent years has been endowed with significant policy and executive power and can offer substantial central resources that are separate from the MoE budget. As a result, university C has placed a lot of emphasis on seeking direct policy support and financial opportunities from CAS on areas including research training, international scholarships, commercialisation and priority setting for key national science programs, despite the fact that the university also receives supervision and governance from the resource-constrained MoE. University C's strategy has successfully increased its funding resources.

Central agency A led and administrated a new significant national science and research funding program. The program accepted project funding applications that were submitted either by national universities directly or through their central sponsoring ministries (as a

recommendation). One leading national university, H, was determined to win a research funding place under this program, therefore developed a research proposal and lodged it directly to the central agency A. Shortly after, H received a verbal rejection from an official at the agency A before its application went further to formal proceedings. The explanation was that 'the topic of the research is not on the funding priority list', hence 'this direct funding application will not be considered in the first instance'.

Knowing the competitive nature and poor coordination among the central departments, university H's executives decided to slightly revise this proposal and submit it to a different central agency, the university's sponsoring ministry B. Through informal interactions, repeated persuasions, third-party endorsement and evidence-supported analysis, H convinced ministry B to believe that this research project would make a significant, high-profile achievement and help improve the overall performance of ministry B. H also told ministry B that agency A endorsed their research project. Ministry B soon agreed to recommend and sponsor H's project proposal and submit it to A. According to this national program's policy, if a central ministry recommended and sponsored a university application, agency A had to consider and assess it thoroughly. Therefore, A accepted H's application formally.

Being accepted did not guarantee success. University H soon organised informal meetings with officials from agency A, suggesting that ministry B highly valued their innovative research project and believed that it was in the national interest and would boost the government's performance. Executives from H also claimed that the university was in the process of negotiating other funding sources (from B) for this program's implementation, and that it would not be in agency A's best interest to ignore the significance of the proposal. Should agency A be interested in also providing matching funds, the benefits and achievements would be shared between agency A and ministry B. Agency A was vigilant about competition and tentatively agreed to consider to 'chip in' to match the level of funds allegedly 'promised' by ministry B. After gaining some leverage, university H then went to ministry B, repeated the same strategy, and eventually convinced it to provide some funding. In the end, the university successfully managed to receive fiscal endorsement from both central organs.

A vice university president who was involved in the whole process concluded:

During this lengthy and complex process, our university's executives undertook intensive and repeated bargaining, personal reporting, elaboration, and consultation with relevant departments and officials. They also involved internal and external research experts to promote the quality of the project and to add more weight to their arguments. Knowing that the central bodies would not speak to each other on many

competitive matters like this case, and that they are sensitive to peer pressures, we took advantage of it from the beginning and strategically lobbied individual departments. In the end, we turned the whole situation around!

Power hierarchy

The central bureaucracy has a highly hierarchical structure of power. Although many central organs are equally ranked on the official organisational chart, there is in fact 'a world of difference between the strong and weak ones (in terms of power influence and wealth)', in the words of one interviewee.

The effect of such a hierarchical power structure is well illustrated by China's Medium and Long-term Strategic Plan for Science and Technology Development 2006–2020 (MLP). For each of the 99 supporting policies making up the plan, one lead ministry (or a central organ of an equivalent level) is assigned responsibility and authority. Prime responsibility for administering the largest number of these policies and funds goes to the NDRC with 29 policies, followed by the MoF with 21 (or 25 if including the State Administration of Taxation), the MoST with 17, and the MoE with nine. The NDRC and MoF have lead roles not only by merit of these large numbers but also in managing arguably some of the most important policies with enormous resources and of great influence. The NDRC is in charge of significant innovation schemes, while the MoF takes the critical role of developing fiscal incentives for R&D increase and independent innovation (Liu Li, 2009, p. 26). Until recently, the MoE has been a relatively low-power and constrained department in the central power hierarchy, with a limited ability to secure state funding resources. However, the MoE's power has gradually increased in the last few years, which is shifting the central dynamics and university strategies.

Powerful ministries often attract more attention and lobbying efforts from a wide range of stakeholders and actors, including from other weaker central departments like the MoE as well as national research universities. My interviewees confirm that they directly or indirectly interact with a range of central agencies on a regular basis due to their important resources and decision-making power. So what are the most powerful and relevant central agencies for national research universities?

As noted in Chapter 1, the NDRC is a key decision-maker and powerful organ in charge of many significant, large-scale national development and investment programs in science, technology, education, culture, and civil administration, including the national funding university scheme Project 211. Many interviewees believe that any policy input provided to the NDRC can potentially make an impact and lead to an investment policy that benefit the policy proposers

and funding recipients a great deal. As a result, the NDRC is a highly popular lobbying target for all types of organisations.

One university personnel from Beijing who once worked at the central government told me that a NDRC's sub-department responsible for developing China's high-technology industries receives numerous lobbyists each day for investment proposals and funding requests. He added,

A small decision from the NDRC can make a huge impact on a region or organisation's development ... Even some of the janitors and cleaners working at the NDRC have made a fortune—many local government officials paid them to leave proposals or paper notes at the desks of heads of departments and sections.

Universities engage with the NDRC on developing and implementing higher education policies such as Project 211. They also lobby the NDRC to seek competitive funding under special science investment programs, such as 'Large Science Programme' (*dakexue gongcheng* 大科学工程).

The MoF has also obtained significant control of central fiscal revenues over the recent decades. It has a key role in developing fiscal policies, managing central financial expenditures, and deciding on funding formulas and delivery for national programs, such as Project 985. It also executes the financial aspects of plans made by the NDRC. In other words, the MoF has fiscal discretion and decision power to decide what blocks of money can be used, how they should be spent, and when to release the funds to recipients (including other ministries).

When it comes to money, the MoF is so powerful that even some national leaders are intimidated. It seemed to be a well-known fact amongst some of my interviewees that the former Chinese President Hu Jintao received 'resistance' and a 'dismissive attitude' from the MoF when he tried to get the ministry to deliver on his predecessor's promise to increase central spending on education to 4% of the GDP in 2010–2011. According to a witness, Hu expressed his outrage and frustration with the 'stubborn' and 'uncooperative' MoF at an internal meeting. The informant said, 'Hu lost his temper at the meeting and pounded his hand on the table ... After both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao's push, the MoF finally delivered the 4% GDP target for education in 2012. The figure however was only justified by manipulating the formula developed by the MoF.' Due to the heavy dependence on funds controlled by the MoF, universities interact with the MoF on a range of issues, including policies of regular education expenditures and implementation of special university funding schemes.

In addition, as mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee remains the primary authority and decision-maker for personnel matters. This

department leads a range of major special funding programs to attract and retain high-level overseas experts (particularly elite Chinese-born researchers) to work at Chinese institutions, including the '1000 Talents Plan', 'Young 1000 Talents Plan', and '10000 Talents Plan' (CPC News, 2013). Universities may interact with the department on these programs that are crucial to their interests. A number of university executives I spoke to have submitted policy recommendations and special letters and reports to the department regarding these programs.

Despite its official rank within the State Council and its essential role for managing higher education which is vital for China's development strategy, the MoE has been a relatively low-profile, low-priority department in the central bureaucracy, with limited clout, fiscal resources and decision-making power in significant national projects. The MoE has limited financial independence and inadequate revenue sources. The MoF decides the national education funding allocated for the MoE based on the MoE's budget proposals, and imposes spending conditions or rules that the MoE has to follow. Regular funding for universities is also directly provided to the universities' accounts by the MoF. Although the MoE ostensibly manages some significant university funding programs, such as Projects 985 and 211, these are often in reality supervised by a multiplicity of actors, including the MoF, MoE, and NDRC that operates the '985/211 Office' located within the MoE. Therefore, the MoE's implementation of existing or new programs is often subject to other central agencies' endorsement and approval.

In 2013, for instance, the MoF advised the MoE and some national universities that it would not fund another round of Project 985 unless it saw some 'big changes' to the existing operational model. The MoE was thus forced to develop and submit new proposals and await approval from MoF. Similarly, the new 2011 Scheme is also jointly developed and managed by the MoF and MoE, hence the MoE's independent power over this program is largely constrained. Even when the MoE has sound policy suggestions and program proposals, it also often finds it challenging to seek or compete for central resources and support. Consequently, the MoE often acts like a lobbyist in front of high-powered agencies. An informant shared with me his experience:

If we [universities] raise issues and make policy suggestions on for example the future of the 985 program, we first lobby the '985 Office' at the MoE. The '985 Office' at the MoE, however, has in turn to lobby the MoF for any changes or real outcomes.

A Chinese higher education expert I interviewed also pointed out:

If the MoE wants to ask the central government to provide more funds to universities, the first problem is how it can put this proposal on the powerful MoF officials' 'radar'

and draw their attention. This proposal has to be presented to the right people [powerful officials at the MoF] who will open their ears and listen. Due to the big gap in power and status between the MoE and MoF, it is sometimes difficult for the MoE to even get the MoF's attention or time, not to mention its support.

Apparently the MoE has little influence on 'the God of Wealth' (*caishenye* 财神爷)—MoF. Sometimes, it is even a challenge for senior MoE officials to book a meeting with a mid-level MoF official. The MoE at times attempts to develop good relationships with the MoF, including through informal means. An insider shared with me a story:

There was one time when a MoF section chief [mid-level official] was already attending a social dinner, he phoned [X, a senior-level official at the MoE] at the last minute to ask some MoE people to join him at the drinking and dining event. The MoE official had no choice but to please the section chief and send [Y, a MoE deputy minister] to drink with him.

Such a situation naturally raises concerns amongst universities. According to protocol, national universities must in the first instance approach the MoE as their main supervisor to raise university-related policy issues. However, the MoE may not be able to help. As one university's director of policy put it:

Increasingly, our universities feel that some national policies are really constraining for us ... The MoE also wants us to voice our views and ideas. But we all understand that the MoE does not have the final say or great influence on national matters, so our complaints and proposals do not work.

This is particularly true of large funding schemes. One interviewee said:

The MoF proposed a new policy on how to spend the new Project 985 funds. Many universities saw huge flaws and complained to the MoE. The MoE explained disappointedly to us that these issues were out of its hands, as it could not get a positive response from the upper levels and relevant ministries, including the MoF.

Due to the MoE's limited power and influence in central politics, universities often try to avoid the bureaucratic barriers, and go over the head of the MoE to directly lobby other higher decision-makers on some significant national policy issues.¹¹³ A chief financial officer at a university suggested that Chinese research universities' finance offices make regular, direct

¹¹³ Guobing Zhang records some cases when university executives lobbied other ministries and national leaders to seek central funding support for education programs such as Project 211. It is often seen as 'helping the MoE' (Guobing Zhang, 2010, pp. 83-84).

contact with the MoF on financial policy issues, although in theory they should only speak to the MoE. He added:

We feel that the MoF likes to hear from universities directly, because it can find out through universities how the MoE uses central funding and how effective the spending is. On the other hand, the MoE also encourages national universities to help it [MoE] in the central structure and seek the MoF's attention by raising issues directly to the MoF.

On one occasion, for instance, Tsinghua received some 'internal intelligence' through the MoE that a powerful central agency Z had drafted policies on a new funding program for young elite researchers. The agency was believed by universities and the MoE to lack professional expertise and experience in education and research-related policies. The draft policies it proposed for the new program focused on developing national science and technology and importing human capital, but neglected Chinese universities' interests and needs in the area of domestic research training and postgraduate education.

Tsinghua was very concerned about the draft policy that could, in the words of one interviewee, 'destroy the future of research training development in China'. Tsinghua immediately liaised with PKU, prepared an urgent letter that was jointly signed by the two university presidents, and asked the Education Minister to hand it over to agency Z. The emotional and well-argued petition letter listed all the drawbacks of the draft policy, suggesting it was 'a huge discrimination and disadvantage against domestically trained researchers' and could 'force talented Chinese students to go abroad'. It also offered feasible alternative options as policy recommendations. The issue quickly received Z's attention, resulting in revisions of its policy before its formal implementation.

SJTU also indirectly lobbied other agencies by offering a helping hand to the MoE. In 2008, when the international financial crises hit, China seized the opportunity and launched a '1000 Talents Plan' (or '1000 Plan') to bring back overseas trained talents to universities and research institutes so that this could contribute their expertise and knowledge to China's scientific research and national development. This high-end talent funding scheme is led by the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the CPC. The selection process requires universities to first lodge all applications to the MoE, which then selects and submits a shortlist to the Organization Department. The latter has the final say on the successful applicants. The '1000 Plan' provides significant funding to hundreds of scientists and professors, and is therefore an important program for both universities and the MoE.

After three rounds of funding, however, some criticism of this scheme gradually emerged in the media, accompanied by scepticism whether the 'money draining' program delivered any

concrete results. While the Organization Department was re-considering whether it should continue or suspend this scheme, it also requested the MoE to respond to such criticism. The MoE's Department of Personnel sought desperate assistance from SJTU that had research expertise and data in this area. Within only ten days, SJTU produced an urgent report to demonstrate that this scheme had achieved significant results in bringing in top talent and should continue. This report included scientific persuasion and factual analysis to prove the overall quality and high yields of the paid returnees, and listed evidence to forecast future demand for high-end human capital in China. It also included a number of concrete policy recommendations and argued convincingly that not only should the program continue but it should also be expanded to younger cohorts. The MoE then formally submitted this SJTU report to the Organization Department as its official response to the recent policy developments.

Soon after, the '1000 Plan' was continued and expanded, and it has been in operation to date (1000Plan.org, 2009). An interviewee involved in this case suggested that although it was difficult to measure the influence of the report in this high-level decision, he believed it certainly accelerated the decision-making process, including the introduction and development of the program's by-product 'Youth 1000 Talents Plan'. He added, 'I recall that Li Yuanchao, the then head of Organization Department, once quoted verbatim some lines from our report at one of his major official speeches.'

Despite its widely perceived weakness, the position of the MoE may change in the future. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the official national expenditure reached 4% of GDP in 2012, covering all the expenditures for the education sector, including university funding programs. The delivery on the public promise of the government not only ensures that the MoF will allocate a guaranteed proportion of funds to the MoE annually, but also provides MoE with more power, discretion and control on how and where to spend the large investment on education, such as decisions on the existing and new university funding programs like Project 985 and the 2011 Scheme. A university vice president explained:

For quite a number of years in the last decade, China invested about 2% of GDP for education. The MoE and universities spared no effort to lobby the central leadership and MoF to seek and secure additional funding. But now a promised 4% of national GDP is to be allocated and provided to the MoE every year for the education sector. Once the MoF hands over the budgetary expenditure fund and leaves the money with the MoE, the MoE will be able to decide how to spend it and how to fund existing/new programs, so the dynamics will necessarily change.

The MoE will gain security, resources and governance power on national education investment. This power gain will likely reduce the need for MoE to lobby the central government for funding, and my interviewees have predicted that universities will also likely shift their focus and spend more efforts on directly lobbying the wealthier MoE to seek benefits, resources and support.

The supreme power of the top leaders

In 1998, Zhu Rongji was appointed Chinese Premier.¹¹⁴ He attended a national university consultation meeting at the Great Hall of the People and delivered a speech to university presidents and party secretaries. During that conference, many observed the then Education Minister Chen Zhili slowly walked to Zhu Rongji on the stage and handed him a note. After the discussion session ended, Zhu spoke assertively yet positively: ‘Just now Comrade Chen Zhili handed over a handwritten note to me, and it read “Dear Premier, please give some support to education” ... I would like to promise an annual increase of 1% from the central financial budgetary expenditure for education.’ This surprising move was considered a significant annual growth and was warmly welcomed by universities.

In the Chinese political system, top party-state leaders, including the CPC Politburo and its Standing Committee, hold paramount decision-making power. They may overturn and overrule any established policies and procedures as well as authorise new initiatives. The Chinese leaders’ supreme authority is evident in education policy areas. It is well documented that a number of most significant national science and education programs in China were often associated with individual national leaders’ personal decisions. Examples include Deng Xiaoping and the National High-tech R&D Programme (or Programme 863) (MoST, 2010b), Jiang Zemin and Project 985 (Min & Wen, 2010; MoE, 2011a; Guobing Zhang, 2010) and the Knowledge Innovation Project (KIP) (CAS, 1998a, 2012), as well as Hu Jintao and the 2011 Scheme (MoF, 2014c). Many university leaders I spoke to suggested that the top leaders’ personal endorsement of these programs was vital for their successful implementation. The case of the drastic university enrolment expansion in 1999 is a good example of how the Politburo overturned existing education policies developed by the MoE. The Politburo authorised the State Council to abandon MoE’s standardised education policymaking procedures and immediately increase college enrolment, with the political goal to maintain social stability and economic growth, reduce unemployment rate, and strengthen its regime during financial crisis (Q. Wang, 2014, p. 151).

¹¹⁴ Zhu Rongji was Chinese Premier from 1998 to 2003.

Such intervention on education policies from top leaders was repeated in 2013. A university's dean of undergraduate studies explained to me:

This year [2013] [Chinese Premier] Li Keqiang suddenly asked all national universities to revise the existing university recruitment numbers for students from western regions, that was an increase of 30,000 student quota for the western regions. This directive came through long after the MoE had already developed and finalised its 2013 national student recruitment plan ... It is a governance model ruled by men. In this case, it is all about a political agenda and equity ... It is a huge decision ... It is difficult for the MoE or universities to change or influence big decisions like this, but it is an 'easy as pie' matter for the national leaders such as premier and vice premiers.

As another example, in 2009 universities and a number of key central organs, including the MoF and MoE, jointly proposed and endorsed a new policy on deregulating postgraduate tuition fees. However, then Premier Wen Jiabao refused to sign it off. The progress of the policy was blocked and its final implementation was held up by Wen until after the end of his term.

Universities recognise the critical importance of interacting with top leaders. Having connections to top leaders and their support can be a game changer during the process of lobbying—as it opens up all opportunities and maximise chances of success. Through networking with top leaders and seeking their attention on significant, urgent or challenging policy matters, university actors can take advantage of the supreme decision power and topmost authority to receive special treatment and enjoy bureaucratic shortcuts and immediate results.

Chinese scholars have provided evidence of such situations. Pan suggests that the personal relations between the Tsinghua leadership and national leaders created opportunities for the university to affect the government's decisions, helped Tsinghua break the restrictions and constraints of national policy, and increased its capacity to make autonomous policies in pursuit of its own goals (Pan, 2007, pp. 138-139). As mentioned in Chapter 3, leaders of Tsinghua and PKU directly lobbied top leaders (Jiang Zemin and Li Lanqing) and successfully proposed an unprecedented national university funding policy, Project 985, which allowed them to fulfil their ambition to build world-class universities (Min & Wen, 2010, pp. 114-116; Guobing Zhang, 2010, pp. 65-67).

A vice university president shared with me his experience:

In the face of endless issues caused by the 'countersigning system' and the complexity of central politics, universities are often frustrated and exhausted. Every day we have

to deal with different views and attitudes from various central agencies, and it seems to take us forever to get a conclusion, decision, closure or final approval. We have found that the attention and intervention from a top leader can quickly resolve these issues, like a charm!

Due to its sensitive nature and personal concerns, my interviewees appeared discreet when sharing details of specific examples about how they interacted with national leaders, whom they normally targeted and what policies or decisions they influenced. However, they assured me repeatedly that such strategies have worked well for them. One interviewee said:

In the Chinese central governance, there is one top leader for each policy portfolio and policy area. When speaking about significant reforms, large policies or institutional changes requiring several layers of consideration and approval, the final decision ultimately comes down to the individual top leaders. It is vital to engage with and seek support from that particular person.

Interviewees from leading research universities explained that they sometimes directly reach senior officials and leaders and seek their support through informal contacts (e.g., alumni network and personal *guanxi*) and private interactions (e.g., private chats and sending special personal letters). They also indirectly lobby them, such as through voicing their opinions at the '*neican*' (内参, known as '*Internal reference*' or *guonei dongtai qingyang* 国内动态清样), an internally circulated paper that is read by high-ranking officials.

According to my interviewees, in 2004, Tsinghua and PKU prepared a joint letter on the future of Project 985, which was signed by 20 prestigious academics and professors (ten professors from each university), and submitted to then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. During a more recent lobbying attempt for a new policy proposal for a joint PhD program in biology, a number of influential professors and overseas returnees sent a jointly signed letter to a CPC Politburo member and Chinese Vice Premier (for education) Liu Yandong, pleading her to grant the two universities a special policy green light for a new 'policy trial'. They succeeded.

One university leader shared with me his insights:

Based on my experience and observation, many things that froze for a period of time saw a sudden breakthrough once they received the highest level's attention. It helped universities cut through layers of bureaucratic procedures and barriers. Once the top-level decision-makers provided personal views and instructions, the relevant central organs would quickly organise themselves and reach a consensus, leading to immediate results and actions. The most effective lobbying we have ever done and cannot restrain

from doing over and over again is the strategy of 'reaching the top' (zhijie zhaolingdao 直接找领导).

It is important to note that not all universities have the capacity to 'reach the top'. Even for the elite universities that often have special connections with and access to the national leaders, this strategy has limitations. 'Requesting top-level attention and support', said one university leader, 'is only saved for critical, challenging and urgent matters. You don't want to overuse such relationships and invaluable power.' I illustrate further how universities develop their ties and interact with national leaders in the next chapter.

Concluding remarks

This chapter presents some outstanding and peculiar characteristics of university lobbying practices in China. One striking finding is the contradiction between the prevalent, important practices of lobbying and the contentious language around lobbying: they do it but do not say it.

Lobbying is a de facto common practice. Chinese national universities are so familiar and accustomed to lobbying that they see it as a most significant, regular and effective component of university–government interactions and is of extreme importance to the university sector. Nevertheless, *youshui*, the Chinese word of lobbying, is still politically and socially sensitive, lacks legitimacy and bears negative connotations which inhibit the formalisation of its practices. Scholars suggest that lobbying is not institutionalised in China and lobby groups often face legitimacy issues (Cheng, 2006, pp. 44,47-48; Cheng et al., 2003, p. 63; Kennedy, 2009, pp. 213-214; Yue Wang, 2008, p. 40), and this includes the higher education sector (S. He, 2009, p. 8). As Scott Kennedy suggests, this situation to a large extent reflects a deep dilemma for the government: although the central leadership wants to appear more consultative on public policy, it fears the political consequences of permitting greater social activism (Kennedy, 2009, p. 213). The higher education sector is not an outlier in this pattern. On one side, the government needs increasing input and feedback from universities, informally accommodates and tolerate lobbying practice, and is indeed subject to influence; on the other, it is more comfortable with top-down communications and dislikes appearing vulnerable or subject to influence.

Consequently, universities rely on various informal tactics and private interactions with the officialdom. University executives, especially those whose careers are controlled by the state, generally adopt covert, cautious and low-key approaches when dealing with government officials, and adjust their language and desensitise their actions accordingly. They hardly ever label their lobbying behaviour as 'an attempt to influence the government' to mitigate the

risks of confrontation. They tend to use alternative, non-confrontational, neutral expressions to describe *youshui*, such as 'participation in policy discussions', 'providing policy feedback', and 'bottom-up reporting', which reflect legitimate policy interactions, or recall acceptable bureaucratic practices.

In addition, as another salient feature, lobbying in this sector is highly fragmented. Universities mostly lobby in an individual, self-focused, and specific issue-based form as opposed to the interest alignment and collective actions that I portrayed in the last chapter, even for a range of important issues of collective interest which require cooperative and joint actions by individuals.

Direct lobbying remains the norm and main course of action because the state is especially wary about a collective voice and united policy initiative from universities that may lead to undesirable threat and challenge to its political authority, thus treats university lobby groups as an illegitimate form of policy communication and restrains their collective political activities. It is also partially due to the conflicted priorities, self-interested focus and competitions amongst universities, as well as the fragmentation of the central bureaucracy that complicates the sponsorships and government reporting of universities. The political factors seem more predominant than the other reasons, because university leaders have made serious attempts to lobby collectively on some policy issues but pulled back due to concerns on the potential political consequences.

Nevertheless, although formal coalitions remain exceptional, universities developed an alternative solution within the confined authoritarian political and regulatory environment: they may 'coordinate' their lobbying efforts by acting simultaneously and separately on an important matter of common interest and consensus. This means talking to the same office at a similar time on the same issue with the same position, rather than taking concrete, joint action. Such an 'alternative' strategy avoids 'political risks' and circumvents the political constraints against formal organisation and alignment of interests. Although it can help achieving their goals, such a custom of 'coordinated' lobbying is unlikely to evolve into a formalised form of allies and organisation.

This behaviour also demonstrates that despite their various strategies and activities of different natures, universities still largely act within the perceived rules and boundaries of state–society interactions and remain cautious not to push the sensitive buttons of the government.

Furthermore, universities' capacity to successfully produce opportunities and exercise influence often depends on how well they understand a fragmented, hierarchical and opaque

political environment, and how well they identify the crucial central decision-makers (various state actors and targets) and exploit the fissures within the authoritarian system. Universities constantly monitor the central bureaucracy to have a clear sight of opportunities and changes in the system.

Fragmentation, rivalry and hierarchy amongst central organs, and the supreme power of the top leaders are the most important characteristics of the central bureaucracy that universities try to exploit in the 'Fragmented Authoritarianism' (FA) framework (Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992, pp. 2-24; Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988, p. 4).¹¹⁵ They identify and adjust their lobbying targets and strategies based on internal power relationships in the central bureaucracy.

For instance, they explore and interact with multiple agencies simultaneously to maximise resources and policy support due to the fragmentation and power rivalry. They access the top leadership to cut through the limitation of the bureaucratic structure and receive policy shortcuts due to the supreme power of the national leaders. They also go over the head of their supervisory MoE and reach out to other central bodies to improve the standing of education or help the MoE to overcome its weakness in the power hierarchy. By monitoring, adapting themselves to and penetrating the central bureaucratic system, universities have shown their capacity to influence the government's decisions and effectively seek comparative advantages.

The universities' lobbying experiences portrayed in Chapters 3 and 4 have demonstrated how universities strategically adapt what language to use, what matters to influence, when to act, who to network with, as well as how to share intelligence and experiences to overcome difficulties coming from formal collective activities. In this process, the political factors and regulatory environment, including the restrictive rules imposed on universities and the political power structure within the central bureaucracy, have a significant impact on universities' positioning, choices and behaviour, including their lobbying targets, expressions, and both coordinated and uncoordinated actions as well as tactics. Universities shape their lobbying strategies and practices for specific policy issues or events based on their understanding and

¹¹⁵ The FA refers to a model for understanding policy process in the Chinese polity, including structural distribution of resources and authority; and processes of decision-making and policy implementation. The fragmented authoritarianism model argues that authority below the very peak of the Chinese political system is fragmented and disjointed. The fragmentation is structurally based and has been enhanced by reform policies regarding procedures. The fragmentation, moreover, grew increasingly pronounced under the reforms beginning in the late 1970s (Lieberthal & Lampton, 1992, p. 8; Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988).

knowledge of the regulatory and political conditions, and their estimation and judgement of what works the best in this system for the contingents.

Meanwhile, by playing by the 'rules of the game' within the system to strategically influence specific policy issues and decisions/contingents (in either a coordinated or uncoordinated manner), universities have shown capacity to produce opportunities for certain elements of change, such as obtaining a competitive advantage, loosening up a specific regulatory constraint and attracting additional resources to the sector.

However, the game of lobbying is not an even playing field, as elite universities in general have much more capacity, resources and personal connections to effectively utilise those strategies in this central system than those smaller, lower-tiered institutions. Thus, the latter is largely disadvantaged in competition.

As a repository of scientific knowledge, social and political influence and connections, and as central players in delivering the national developmental strategy, would universities gain more influence and leverage in the governmental process? The next chapter examines the most significant aspects of the universities' toolkit and tactics when adapting to this complex bureaucracy and lobbying government officials in various scenarios.

Chapter 5—Lobbying imperfect institutions: human factors, scientific persuasion and policy experimentation

Introduction

Every government organisation develops self-restraining rules and legitimate institutions to ensure its operation and regulate the conduct and behaviour of its agents in the governmental process (X. Liu, 2007, pp. 9-10). Since 1979, the Chinese government has undertaken reforms and developed new rules to render the system more legible and predictable by formalising official procedures (K. Yu, 2008, pp. 8-12). A ‘government personnel accountability system’ (*guanyuan wenzhezhi* 官员问责制) and a ‘public servants law’ (*gongwuyuanfa* 公务员法), for instance, were introduced as institutional rules to constrain power abuse of individuals within government organisations (L. Han & Xie, 2013, p. 83; X. Liu, 2007, p. 10; K. Yu, 2008, p. 11). So has the new institutional structure of this unique authoritarian system changed its operational and regulatory environment and governmental processes? More importantly for my discussion here, how has this development impacted on universities and their lobbying practices?

The chapter provides an in-depth study on the workings of these institutions and processes within the central system, especially the institutionalisation versus informal and personal factors. It then examines the most significant aspects of the universities’ lobbying strategies in various scenarios when they interact with the system.

This chapter reveals that in the university sector, informal and personal factors still prevail in the central system due to a range of political, institutional, normative and economic factors. The idea that the Chinese system becomes more institutionalised and the importance of *guanxi* is changing (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 124; Gold et al., 2002; Guthrie, 1998, 1999; Kennedy, 2008, p. 109; 2009, p. 207; USCBC, 2008) is challenged by the enduring centrality of these factors in the central system and in university–government interactions.

The capacity of universities to adapt and prosper in such a complex bureaucratic setting largely depends on their accumulation and deployment of three specific forms of social and cultural capital. These are the most significant aspects of the universities’ toolkit: mobilising human factors (e.g., personal connections, alumni networks and intelligence gathering), rational persuasion through knowledge (e.g., presenting evidence and third-party endorsement), and involvement in local policy experimentation (e.g., policy innovation to force a new policy and leading by example (Heilmann, 2008, pp. 2-4, 29-30)). This chapter investigates these three

aspects. It concludes that the central system plays a dominant role in shaping universities' lobbying behaviour; and that universities' lobbying strategies may potentially produce incremental impact on the system.

Institutionalising the Chinese state

'Institutions' are usually understood as semi-persistent 'formal and informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organisational structure of the polity or political economy' (Haggart, 2014, pp. 34-35, 46). Institutions generally provide a defined framework of rules, regulations, norms and standards for human behaviour and interactions. A related term 'formalisation' refers to the extent to which 'rules governing behaviour are precisely and explicitly formulated and ... roles and role relations are prescribed independently of the personal attributes of individuals occupying positions in the structure' (Guthrie, 1999, p. 43; Scott, 1987, p. 33). For the purpose of this chapter, I broadly define both institutionalisation and formalisation as the progressive establishment of formal rules or norms, or the standard operating procedures and structures that govern the operations and behaviour of bureaucratic organisations and their relationships with external actors.

The motivation and logic behind the institutional formalisation of an organisation shape the outcome of the process and what new rules are adopted. Institutions may reduce personal influence in the organisation structure and its operations, or create greater regulation, routinisation, objectivity, stability and transparency of decision-making. Scholars have provided various characterisations of such a process. From a rationalist perspective (Elster & Hylland, 1985; Hall & Taylor, 1996, pp. 944-946; Shepsle & Weingast, 1987, pp. 85-104; Swidler, 1986, pp. 273-286), formalisation is a rationalisation process enacted by the management or leadership of the organisation to simplify internal relationships, and increase efficiency, predictability, and profitability. As informality and personal factors (variable personal traits, hierarchy, and factions) often cause organisational inefficiency and volatility, many new rules and principles (formalised organisational processes) are intentionally developed to reduce the influence of these personal and informal elements.

The institutionalist perspective, on the other side, posits that organisations exist in institutional environments, and often adopt institutions for reasons of legitimacy rather than because of the demands of efficiency and productivity. In other words, the new institutional forms, practices and procedures adopted by modern organisations are cultural-specific. Even the most seemingly bureaucratic practices are shaped by ideas about what they mean in a specific cultural or normative environment. The goal is to enhance the social legitimacy of these organisations or their participants, and respond to normative pressures, political mandates, or

economic certainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, pp. 1-40; Dobbin, Sutton, Meyer, & Scott, 1993; Edelman, 1990; Guthrie, 1999, p. 44; Hall & Taylor, 1996, pp. 946-950; Meyer & Rowan, 1977, pp. 340-363). As social factors and cultural practices shape institutional outcomes, such institutional structures may be more symbolic than practical (Hall & Taylor, 1996, pp. 946-950; Meyer & Rowan, 1977, pp. 340-363; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, pp. 1-40). Campbell described the distinction as a 'logic of social appropriateness' in contrast to a 'logic of instrumentality' (Campbell, 1995, p. 8). For example, Soysal illustrates that the policies toward immigrants adopted by many states in Europe were pursued, not because they were most functional for the nation, but because the evolving conceptions of human rights promulgated by international regimes made such policies seem appropriate and others illegitimate in the eyes of national authorities (Soysal, 1994, pp. 141-142).

So how does this discussion apply to China? Guthrie's work (Guthrie, 1999, pp. 42-44) on formal rational bureaucracies in Chinese firms clearly fits more with the social institutional perspective than with rationalist theories. His research shows that the formalisation of organisations during economic transition is often not a consequence of a rational calculation to maximise profits. While Chinese firms may be embracing Western-style structures with the long-term goal of efficiency, they are adopting these specific institutional structures because they are perceived as being efficient based on the success of Western companies. As such they respond to normative pressures, and imitate the practices of other successful organisations, which represent a type of legitimacy in line with the ideals and organisational models hailed as exemplary in the economic transition.

In the cases illustrated by Guthrie (1999), formalisation has, to a certain extent, reduced the importance of informal behaviour and personal relationships in an organisational structure. For instance, company managers allow connections and networks to factor significantly into labour market decisions and practices. Thus, the effect is more than symbolic. However, social, normative, and economic factors, such as the background, professionalism and economic conception of general manager, firm location, and foreign investment partnership, all play an important role in the institutional decisions.

The institutionalist perspective appears to explain the reasons behind the Chinese government's institutionalisation better than rationalist theories. In facing pressure from the public to improve its efficiency and behaviour, the government needs to constantly adjust its practices, review its relationships with social organisations, and establish new structures and rules, to respond to changes of values and norms in society (Sha, Yuan, Jian, & Wang, 2009, p. 233). While the CPC has been in a protracted state of 'atrophy' (Shambaugh, 2008a, 2008b), it has undertaken a number of pragmatic, incremental and adaptive measures aimed at

reinventing itself and strengthening its rule to retain its grip on power in an effort to strengthen the regime itself. Its institutional adjustments are deliberately established in order to deal with social pressures, adapt to the socialist market economy system, and create new bases for the social and political legitimacy of the CPC's authority (X. Liu, 2007, p. 10; Zheng, 2010, p. 43).

In the early reform period, informal practices prevailed in every Chinese organisation at every level, but were particularly intense at the highest level of the state. Personal judgement was crucial, demand for quick decisions was great, and secrecy was imperative (Pye, 1992, pp. 171-179). Since 1978, the Chinese government has started to establish a range of self-restraining rules and formal policies to increase accountability, regulate its internal organisations, and reduce informal, personal practices (X. Liu, 2007, p. 10; K. Yu, 2008, pp. 8-12). The 15th National Party Congress in September 1997 indicated that the Chinese government began its official process of management legalisation and formal institutionalisation (*zhengshi zhidu* 正式制度).

At the 17th National Party Congress and 11th National People's Congress, the government reports presented by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao respectively covered detailed analysis of the institutionalisation of the administrative system. According to Hu's report, the areas for institutional reform included: moving the central government's functional role away from 'centralised control' to 'supervision and services provision'; linking accountability to individual officials' power; improving the government's overall responsibility system; improving scientific decision-making (*kexue juece* 科学决策); regulating administrative behaviour; regulating administrative approval procedures (*xingzheng shenpi* 行政审批); improving the coordination of central organs; as well as reducing the official ranks within the administrative hierarchy (*xingzheng cengci* 行政层次) (Jintao Hu, 2007). Again, reports from the 18th Party Congress in October 2014 also indicated reform in the same direction (Xinhuanet, 2014a).¹¹⁶

To demonstrate the progress of governmental institutionalisation during early 1979–August 2008, the State Council issued 1,110 internal administrative regulations or organisational policies, including regulations on administrative policy formulation and decision-making proceedings, administrative agency establishment and staffing, as well as a civil servants act and administrative supervision and review law. Between September 2001 and October 2007, the State Council also cancelled or improved 1,992 administrative approval items to reduce

¹¹⁶ While Hu/Wen tenures promoted rules and institutions, Xi's first term suggests a return to autocratic rule and concentration of power in the elites. It remains unknown whether there will be a decline of institutions, and how it will impact on universities.

bureaucratic procedures for administrative examination and approval and black-box operations. A government staff legal training system was gradually established at many central organs (Q. Huang, 2008, pp. 46-47).

With the need to make informed decisions, the state also increased consultations and deliberations in policy processes, especially with experts, to facilitate the drafting of policies. The development of think tanks and decision-making consultations became an agenda for the first time in a CPC document in 2013.¹¹⁷ A former vice president of the Party School Li Junru said (Y. Chen, 2014):

In an effort to improve deliberative, consultative democracy, the CPC is in the process of developing new rules and regulations to define which significant national issues have to be deliberated before decisions are made ... In the future process of decision-making, think tanks can play a role. The reports by important think tanks may even directly become the basis for decisions.

Is it appropriate to assume that such a lengthy process of institutionalisation has direct (and indirect) consequences on government organisations, universities, as well as individuals? The existence of such new institutional arrangements does not, on its own, constitute evidence of a dramatic shift away from the enduring practices of the pre-reform system. As Guthrie suggests, if the new institutional, rational-legal structures adopted at the state level are having little impact on decisions and practices on the ground, this indicates that, even in the reform era, elements of the past communist system, such as personalised patron-client authority relations, would endure (Guthrie, 1999, p. 72). So have the pragmatic adjustments and adaptive measures adopted at the central level to enhance legitimacy significantly changed the traditional structures of authority relations and the norms of informality in the system or on the ground? Have they altered the interactions between the government and universities?

Higher education governance: institutionalised arrangements versus informal practices

Through interviewing numerous university executives, I learnt about their personal experiences and firsthand observations on the internal operations, policy processes and decision-making within the central system, especially the various government bodies that

¹¹⁷ The CPC document 'the CPC central committee's decisions on several major issues about deepening reform' (*zhonggong zhongyang guanyu quanmian shenhua gaige ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding* 中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定) was issued at the third plenary session of the 18th CPC Central Committee meeting in 2013.

produce higher education and research policies and regulations (W. Huang, 2002).¹¹⁸ They suggested that under constant pressure and demand to improve their public accountability and transparency, the central agencies have demonstrated a growing consciousness of public credibility and fairness. The governance is, at least on paper, becoming more formalised with respect to organisational budgeting, procedures and structures. However, the overwhelming view is that despite the increasing institutional formalisation, informal and personal practices prevail and the traditional relations and norms endure in the central system. This situation has impacted on universities' lobbying behaviour and outcomes.

Institutionalised arrangements

Being part of the central system, the higher education governance has undertaken a series of institutional reforms, including formalising the internal organisational structures and regulating education policymaking processes, with the aim of transforming the highly hierarchical and centralised 'government control model' to a more participatory, autonomous and rational 'government supervision model'. If the system is successfully reformed, universities would 'receive greater institutional autonomy and accountability' (M. Yang, 2003a, pp. 3-4).

In recent years, the official procedures for various major higher education policies and funding programs, such as the 2011 Scheme administered by the MoE and MoF (MoF, 2014c), have been increasingly built on policy research, public consultations, policy assessment and peer reviews, as well as merit-based selection and deliberations. Many central ministries, such as the MIIT, have become particularly strict on funding applications and appraisal, especially in sensitive research areas such as national defence technologies.¹¹⁹ A national funding proposal may take several years before its implementation.¹²⁰ An interviewee shared his experience on the progress of this institutionalisation:

Ten years ago, the requirement of 'ticking all the boxes and going through all the steps' did not exist. A chief of an MoE office (*chuzhang* 处长), for example, was often able to

¹¹⁸ As explained in Chapters 1 and 4, the MoE and its subordinate departments are the core education governance body (Yao, 2004), but national higher education and research policies are closely associated with a number of central government organisations and actors, such as the State Council, the MoF, the MoST, and the NDRC.

¹¹⁹ Some typical procedures include recommendation letters from third-party financial companies, investment appraisal, project practicality assessment, preliminary design evaluation, inspections and acceptance, and financial auditing.

¹²⁰ One example is a significant national funding program 'Large Science Project' (*dakexue gongcheng* 大科学工程) led by the NDRC. It has taken some universities five years to go through the proceedings and receive an initial approval.

make an on-the-spot decision on many matters such as medium-scale national programs. But now things are more regulated. The officials have to follow the rules, go through all procedures, and tick off the boxes. At least now one can see and feel some level of ‘procedural fairness’ (*chengxu gongzheng* 程序公正) on paper, although within each of the defined procedures, the actual conducts and practices may be quite different from the ‘theory’.

Expert panels have been added to the mandated policymaking proceedings of many major national policies and funding projects. In March 2014, for instance, the MoE initiated and convened a series of consultations with university representatives and education experts to collect suggestions on the *gaokao* reform and student admissions policies. Such procedural measures help the government strengthen its political and social legitimacy, and demonstrate to the public that its decisions are ‘fair, objective and open’. Some interviewees hold an optimistic view that the increasing involvement of academics in the government processes may help promote objectivity and integrity in public policymaking. One interviewee said:

I participated in a number of government formal proceedings and expert panels for national policies and programs. I saw that some members on the expert committees, especially those overseas returnees and foreign trained professors, took their policy advisory roles very seriously. Sometimes they did their own investigations and debated vigorously about certain facts at our panel meetings. Notwithstanding the strong administrative power in the central bureaucracy, I believe that the integrity and intellectual engagement of these experts will bring positive influence to bear and gradually improve the quality, objectivity and openness of governmental policies.

To a certain extent, the government has become more consultative and willing to consider universities’ opinions and advice, especially on technical and professional matters and complex macro-level reform issues which largely require experts’ knowledge. The MoE officials, for instance, often seek policy ideas and feedback directly from personnel of key national universities. Numerous university executives suggested that they often receive personal invitations for face-to-face meetings or phone calls from their MoE colleagues on specific matters. When developing new policies, it is common for MoE officials to organise small, private meetings with personnel from only a few prestigious universities. They often ask my interviewees questions such as ‘what do you think about this approach? How would it work?’ Many interviewees gained a strong impression that government officials work hard and prudently to ‘avoid any mishaps and public embarrassment’. They also seek a rationale to justify their decisions, because stakeholders that are disadvantaged by certain government policies often contest and question the officials.

Informality and human factors

Despite these new arrangements and developments, personal and informal practices remain central and prevalent in the complex bureaucratic structure and throughout the operational proceedings and organisational decision-making process. This resonates with what some Chinese scholars have observed: informal, personal practices and rule violations are widespread in central agencies in China (Cao et al., 2013, p. 461; Y. Shi & Rao, 2010, p. 1128; W. Zhou, 2011, pp. 18-19).¹²¹

For example, scholars find that a substantial portion of public funding is funnelled to favourite scientists and universities through informal channels, such as internal deliberations, earmarks or informal requests, rather than through rigorous and fair peer review processes. Competitive advantages are given to those who maintain close relations with government officials, such as favourable evaluation and career promotion. Some scientists are able to receive major financial support from multiple sources. Information on internal deliberations, including nomination for fellowships with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Chinese Academy of Engineering, supposedly strictly confidential, are at times disclosed to those who have *guanxi*. Academics on personal terms with officials receive a disproportionate support for their research in China and are more likely to be considered for various academic honours (Cao et al., 2013, p. 461; Y. Shi & Rao, 2010, p. 1128). My interviews have strongly supported and proved the above observations. Institutionalisation has not reduced the importance of informality and what I call 'human factors'.

In this thesis, I broadly define 'human factors' (*renwei yinsu* 人为因素) as 'personal relationships and informal interactions with the policy interest-related actors inside and outside the government (officials and policy advisors), as well as the personal attributes of individual government officials (personal interests, background and ties)'. 'Informality' generally refers to the informal behaviour, conducts and interactions of policy actors (e.g., officials, policy advisors and consultants) in the government structure and processes which are against, or near the border of, formal regulations and codes of conduct. In this chapter, human factors and informal practices closely relate to each other, with examples including personal arbitrary discretions, power abuse to pursue special interests, and the capacity to speed up decision-making or twist the rules.

To illustrate the prevalence of human factors and informal practices in the system, I focus on four aspects of interaction: the authority relationships within the government organisations,

¹²¹ Examples of the rule violations include officials' abuse of administrative approval authority, personal misconducts, and breach of confidence. I will elaborate later in the chapter.

power concentration and discretions of individual officials, policy consultations for decision-making, and policy implementation and rule enforcement.

Authority relationships

Andrew Walder's (1986) research on the structure of the work unit in pre-reform China reveals an organisational system that emphasises political and social relations in the firm, and the workers' dependence on supervisors, management, and the party. The relationships between workers and supervisors were particularistic, and supervisors had considerable discretion over processes in the workplace. Supervisors within organisations made decisions about worker advantages and advancement based on personal relations and attributes, unrestrained by formal rules or routinised decision-making systems (Guthrie, 1999, pp. 44-45; Walder, 1986). The validity of Walder's analysis still extends to most of the formal institutions of the socialist state.

Due to the legacy of clientelism and a culture of hierarchical authority within the government bureaucracy, government personnel are highly submissive to their work-group leaders and superiors, and comply with their instructions deferentially without questioning. The government officials I spoke to suggested that they may attempt to provide advice and persuade their superiors on certain matters, but they never challenge the superiors' personal views or decisions, even when they seem erroneous or unethical. Why? In the central cadre system, one's personal career and promotion opportunities are in the hands of the superiors, so as an interviewee said, 'It is wise not to offend or hassle them [supervisors]—just listen and do it!' A university executive has observed that the hierarchical relationships within the central bureaucracy seem to have gotten worse and worse in recent years. He described:

For many big decisions, if the superior in charge (*zhuguan shangji lingdao* 主管上级领导) makes up his mind, indicates his wish, or simply nods, his subordinates will and must abide by it, even if the subordinates feel that the decision is inappropriate or makes little sense ... This deeply-embedded organisational culture is very difficult to change.

In the meantime, as the government leaders and superiors can significantly impact on their subordinates' handling of policy matters, this hierarchical structure and logic of authority relationships have been taken advantage by universities in lobbying. A university executive shared with me his experience and strategy:

When the heads of divisions (*sizhang* 司长) refuse to help a university or disagree with it on a policy decision, the university can lobby their bosses—the higher levels of senior executives, such as minister or deputy minister, because they have the personal power to overturn the earlier decisions by the heads of divisions.

Individual powers

A flat government structure facilitates top-down and bottom-up communications and enables ground intelligence to reach the top more rapidly and uninterruptedly (M.-a. Jiang, 2008, p. 76). Whereas China's hierarchical and fragmented structure (as illustrated in Chapter 4) is highly susceptible to personal and informal influences at various administrative levels, leading to inflated personal discretions and the concentration and abuse of power. One salient feature is that individual officials' administrative powers and discretions often seem to be greater and broader in practice than formally defined for their level. This applies to individual officials ranging from high-level decision-makers, to middle-level policy developers and directors, to ground-level policy implementers and administrators. Subsequently, these actors involved in a policy process may all affect the policy outcomes.

As I discussed in Chapter 4, the government leaders and senior executives hold significant personal decision-making authority and influence. It is not rare that substantial policy deliberations are ultimately concluded and decided based solely on their personal preferences. An interviewee said:

Some high-ranking individuals in the central government, for instance, can quickly decide to invest three billion yuan on one specific province instead of another [province]. Similarly, some senior leaders and executives at the MoE have a great authority and discretion to decide on, for example, which national universities should receive special funding for a large campus infrastructure project. When high-level officials want to do something, they possess the power to make it happen. Their decisions on policy matters are often subject to personal backgrounds, ties and personalities.

A university vice president pointed out:

The higher [rank] you go, the more flexible it becomes. Government officials, especially higher-level leaders and executives, often follow their own feelings (*genzhe ganjue zou* 跟着感觉走) when they are making administrative judgements or decisions.

As Chen suggests, due to their influence and discretion, high-level officials' public statements and casual comments are often carefully analysed and acted upon by the government as a directive or guidance for forthcoming policies or future development directions. Their personal visits to a university or attendance in a campus event are often interpreted as special ties and endorsement for that university (C. Chen, 2009, pp. 42-43) which may indicate priority support. The universities I spoke to pay particular attention to strengthening their ties and activities with the senior officialdom, such as inviting them to their campuses.

In the meantime, the mid-level management officials of the bureaucracy, such as heads of divisions (*sizhang* 司长), chiefs of offices (*chuzhang* 处长) and directors of sections (*zhuguan* 主管),¹²² often hold discretionary authority and make executive decisions on the details of small and medium national policies, such as the numbers of recipients and financing of funding programs. They also manage the drafting and implementation of the specifics and technicalities of major national policies, such as national student recruitment reforms. Particularly, the mid-level officials from the central units that handle and allocate ‘resources’ possess significant powers, because many funds are in their hands. A central ministry’s office, for instance, has the authority to manage detailed distributions of some major national funds to individual university recipients. A university executive explained to me the significant discretion and influence of the chief of that office:

We are talking big numbers here, like millions. If the chief decides to move her fingers a little to the left when writing on the paper, and make a slight modification to the figure, which she can, it will make a difference of millions of yuan to us [universities].

A university’s vice president pointed out:

In comparison, the government may establish more boundaries and rules for significant national policy decisions, such as large competitive funding projects, than implementation-level policies, such as medium and small-scale grants. Some formal proceedings like peer review-based selection are mandated for the former but not for the latter. Hence, mid-level officials can make swift and final decisions on many medium policies or implementation issues.

This situation allows space for personal manipulation and game playing for both officials and universities. A university vice president suggested to me without providing further details that some government executives have favoured certain institutions that they have special personal connections with, and created tailored programs (*teshu zhuanxiang* 特殊专项) just to fit these institutions’ conditions and needs. A former middle-rank government official also admitted to me in private that he has helped his old university secure significant funding numerous times and suggested that it is a common practice amongst his government colleagues. By mobilising human factors and exploiting such fissures in the government, the universities have advanced their competitive interests.

¹²² Three major levels/ranks of MoE organisational management include ministers and deputy ministers (*buji* 部级), heads of departments or divisions (*siji* 司级), and chiefs or heads of sections or offices (*chuji* 处级).

Another interesting aspect of middle-level officials' power is how they can reshape the upper-level decisions and their implementation in practice. A university executive shared his experience:

This has happened to us several times: after the upper-level executives have made decisions to approve and support our policy proposals, the mid-level directors in charge of actual implementation 'conveniently' misinterpreted or altered some technical details of the decisions, or even intentionally delayed the implementation process ... That was because they felt disrespected or humiliated that we lobbied their superiors and put pressure on them ... Therefore, to prevent such resistance, we have to make a great effort to maintain good *guanxi* with officials at all levels and to keep them all in the loop.

In addition, the ground-level administrative personnel also have effective individual powers depending on their roles and responsibilities. For instance, some junior officials have important gatekeeping authority and discretion, including to validate university applications with an official stamp (*gaizhang* 盖章) or reject one's proposal upfront on a small technicality. These officials may decide on when and how to apply a certain rule to block approval of a specific project. During a meeting that I attended in China, a number of university presidents complained in private that many junior government clerks held too much of such power over university matters and were difficult for them to deal with.

Policy consultations

Despite increasing consultations and expert panels, in certain restricted policy areas that normally involve sensitive or high-stake issues (the 'no-go zone' and 'contention zone' as I illustrated in Chapter 2), the government continues to have a dominating, top-down policymaking style with minimal consultations, openness and transparency in the process. For instance, several universities have complained to me about a specific central ministry's division which approves new campus construction and infrastructure projects (*jjian xiangmu* 基建项目). The division often applies rules and standards from a very old 1992 policy document (partially revised in 2004) to scrutinise and reject universities' construction proposals. An interviewee explained that the government officials know the 1992 policy is extremely outdated, rigid and irrational. Universities request them to relax the rules, but they 'hold onto them tightly and use them whenever they need to justify arbitrary decisions (*jieshiquan quanzai tanali* 解释权全在他那里)'. In episodes like this, universities have to employ informal tactics to network with the relevant officials and explore loopholes.

What about the other policy matters that allow for formal consultations? In the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2, I demonstrated that the government has increasingly involved professional experts and non-state stakeholders in the official policymaking proceedings to seek trustworthy information and technical advice, as well as to legitimise their decision-making and prevent mishaps. This is especially true of new, major national policies. However, the participation of various non-state entities is not yet formally accommodated and supported at the institutional level (H. Han, 2013, p. 327). Commonly, the state receives policy advice from think tanks that operate within the confines of the system, most of which it controls directly (Sharma, 2014). In numerous cases, public policy consultations remain simply a show. The deputy director of the Zhejiang Provincial Experts Advisory Committee pointed out during a media interview that, ‘Government leaders do not pay enough attention to experts’ advice, and think tanks only play a limited role in China ... Bureaucratic domination of the policy process is a latent rule (*qianguize* 潜规则)’ (Y. Chen, 2014). My interviewees portrayed a picture of how the government officials lead and shape policy consultations, exercise and reinforce their administrative power, and influence the outcomes. Here I focus on some of the most important aspects.

First, government officials decide on the composition and memberships of expert advisory committees (*zhuanjia zixunzu* 专家咨询组) and consultation meetings (*yijian zhengqiuahui* 意见征求会). For instance, in the process of drafting China’s Medium and Long-term Development Plan for Science and Technology during 2003–2006, the State Council conducted consultations with various experts and stakeholders. In reality, the government invited very few experts with opposing opinions (Liu Li, 2009, p. 26). Officials generally selected university executives and academics with whom they already had good connections and knew well. A university executive pointed out:

It would be more rational, scientific and useful if the government conducts genuine public consultations with a wider range of stakeholders and impartial experts. However, it is more convenient, expedient and comfortable for the officials to discuss with their familiar, close contacts for policy decisions and issues—the people they already know and trust well, and have developed good *guanxi*. Hence, it is a common practice to include their friends to the consultations and the policy advisory and expert panels.

Consequently, conflicts of interest abound; such practices favour certain universities and disadvantage the others in terms of policy access and influence. University N in Beijing is well known for its frequent involvement and strong presence in the advisory committees on certain policy matters due to its close ties with the central officials in charge of that policy area. This will likely advance N’s interests. Universities J and T have often missed out such opportunities

as they have relatively weak links and are geographically distant from the nation's capital. Several other national universities are also known to have successfully influenced state officials to include their 'preferred' members (their 'own people') to various policy expert panels of national awards and programs, resulting in winning in the selections and assessments. Government officials can also reveal confidential information to their connected institutions about the composition of anonymous expert panel members. The universities then lobby these members individually for good ratings and votes. Interactions of such nature 'happen very frequently', especially for the policies related to awards, quotas and allocations of resources.

Second, government officials maintain leadership over the ad hoc advisory committees, and the recommendations and conclusions made by the committees remain subject to the officials' personal interventions and preferences. According to my interviewees who are involved in government policy consultations, the officials and committee members generally have a superior-subordinate relationship (*shangxiaji guanxi* 上下级关系) and an unequal dialogue. For university executives and academics, maintaining a good *guanxi* with officials is imperative for their career and funding (Cao et al., 2013, p. 461; Pan, 2007; Y. Shi & Rao, 2010, p. 1128; R. Yang et al., 2007, p. 461). When the government officials express their strong advocacy or hint personal inclinations, the members on the expert panels typically 'take the hints' (*xin ling shen hui* 心领神会) and follow their instructions. In addition, policy advisors and expert committee members are often subject to human factors themselves and present the biased, special interests of their institutions and friends in policy process. These personal and informal conducts and conflicts of interest raise serious integrity and ethical issues.

Some interviewees expressed their frustrations about the prevalent human factors during the consultation process, and suggested that universities have no choice but to network with officials and panel members informally for favourable support on a range of national policies. When they failed to do so, they were quickly eliminated by the officials and committees, even though they were the top performers and highest ranked in the policy process. 'We feel discriminated and bullied by this system,' one interviewee said.

Policy execution and supervision

A similar ratio of formal and informal practices is also at work in the realm of policy execution and implementation. Formal rules and principles remain subject to officials' arbitrary interpretations and personal discretions. It is not rare that individual government officials manipulate or customise introduced policies and operate near the margin of the written rules and regulations to fit their own needs. Government officials, for example, skipped certain proceedings, fast-tracked the applications and proposals by favoured universities, and disclosed confidential information on competitive funding and selection details. They not only

twist or bend the rules themselves, but also tolerate their connected universities to bend the rules. Two central organs, for instance, are said to have turned a blind eye when several universities failed to abide by some policies and operated on the border of legality. One central ministry has also quietly allowed some universities to conduct policy experiments despite the lack of formal permissions. This rule-bending culture in the government creates opportunities and a space of flexibility for some universities to gain greater resources and autonomy in the rigid regulatory environment.

As an example, University H and University W received some funding for institutional development. The government policy stated that the money was strictly for lab equipment purchases, but H and W broke the rules and used some of the funding for staff salaries and research overheads which were severely underfunded. The government officials decided to keep their eyes half-shut. The universities continued doing it for a while. A university vice president commented:

In many other countries where rules and procedures have been well established and the system has been formally regulated, people naturally follow the routines and standards. Yet, in China, as long as one does not commit crimes, break the law, or have anti-social, anti-party behaviour, almost everything is flexible and negotiable! Many things will not work out smoothly in China if one only follows the formal rules written on paper.

Explanations

From the above analysis, we can infer that the Chinese system is imperfectly institutionalised. Formal institutions have played a limited role in restraining informal and personal factors. The goals of the institutional reforms of higher education administration are far from being fulfilled.¹²³ So why have human factors remained influential against all odds and predictions?

According to Douglass North, institutions, as human-devised constraints that structure human interactions, are formed by formal constraints (rules, laws, constitutions), informal constraints (norms of behaviour, conventions, and self-imposed codes of conduct), and their enforcement characteristics. Together they define the incentive structure of societies and specifically economies (North, 1993). A brief analysis of these three institutional aspects may provide the answers to the case of China.

¹²³ As explained earlier in the chapter, the goals are regulating the internal organisational structure and processes, and transforming the higher education governance model and government–university relations.

First, formal rules are flawed and inadequate. The goal of deliberate institutionalisation is to deal with socio-economic pressures and strengthen its regime, rather than seeking genuine improvements of efficiency and transparency. The new institutional rules within the Chinese government organisations are mostly internally developed by officials without sufficient public supervision and participation. They are driven by self-interest, contain ambiguity and conflicts of interest, and are incapable of meeting the needs of social change and of universities' development alike. Many core elements in the system, such as authority relations, power concentration and the lack of formal institutions for bottom-up initiatives by non-state actors, remain unsolved.

For instance, during the formal institutionalisation, the fundamental principles of the system persistently focus on the central leaders' paramount authority, concentration of power, and their personal directives. The 'new' institutions are put in place to legitimise and strengthen, not change, the existing power structure and hierarchies. The Central Leading Small Groups (CLSGs) is essentially a mechanism to enable the individual central leaders to organise, perpetuate and exercise their personal powers and preferences over key political and policy agendas (Zheng, 2010, p. 108), but it is disguised as a rational formal institution to 'improve policy coordination'. The state leaders are empowered to manipulate institutions and policies, and capitalise universities and their special socio-economic functions (X. Jin, 2009) to serve certain interests.¹²⁴

Meanwhile, government institutions remain vague in areas including internal coordination and the division of interests between agencies, staff incentive mechanisms, rewards and penalty standards, as well as the administrative accountability system (X. Liu, 2007, p. 10). For example, the distributions of certain resources are not mandated by laws and regulations, hence individual offices and personnel are empowered with decision-making authority and discretions on such allocations. Consequently, personal influence, manipulation and game playing prevail. Furthermore, in an environment where coordination and supervision are not

¹²⁴ Higher education has long served those individuals in power as a strategic instrument to meet their national development objectives (Tsang, 2000). Tu finds that between 1978 and 2006, a large proportion of national higher education policies were developed based on the principles and guidelines authorised by the party-state leaders (Tu, 2006, pp. 63-64). To date, the mandate for policies is still justified by an appeal to the views or thinking of a paramount leader as it was decades ago (Lo, 1991; Tsang, 2000). For instance, in 1998, the state formalised the rule of 'university presidents' accountability system under the party committee's leadership' aiming to strengthen the political regime through controlling universities. Zhu Rongji's 1999 policy on decentralisation and expansion of the higher education sector was a means to address the social-economic and political consequences of the Asian financial crisis (Q. Wang, 2014), and Xi Jinping's 2014 directive on 'socialist education' aims to use universities to promote party ideology to new generations and strengthen political stability (S. Tian, 2015).

properly institutionalised, it is difficult to restrict personal power abuse (M.-a. Jiang, 2008, pp. 76-77). In the Chinese government, the roles, functions and resources assigned to various public administration departments are dispersed, overlapped and fragmented. Each department does things in its own way, and has a separate pattern and template from others in staffing, funding and assessment. One specific administrative unit or division often has comprehensive control over a particular policy area, including policy consultation, drafting, implementation, and supervision. This fragmented operational structure leads to poor supervision, cultivates the concentration of power and resources, and allows individuals to abuse their administrative authority. These long-standing flaws in the system continue to develop and deepen.

Second, informal constraints, such as new ethical codes of conduct, new norms of behaviour, as well as professional and moral standards, have not been well developed or established in the government. Officials continuously stick to the existing cultural values and customs, and the old moral templates and principles (X. Liu, 2007, pp. 10-11). In particular, higher education governance and operation are modelled on the conventions of the central planned economy. They have deeply embedded a set of norms and conventions, including top-down central intervention and decision-making, personal discretions, and highly hierarchical authority relationships (Liao & Zhang, 2006, p. 227; L. Zhang, 2013). These cultural customs continue to promote and facilitate informal and personal practices. A large number of university personnel I spoke to have referred to the higher education governance as 'the last, enduring fort of the planned economy in the central government'.

In particular, personal interests motivate informal and personal practices, and remain at the centre of the traditional normative values, and cognitive and behavioural conventions, which have undermined institutionalisation at a profound level (X. Liu, 2007, p. 10). Smith's paper (Smith, 2010) on township governments in China has captured how the personal interests of public servants motivate and drive their informal practices and behaviour in government affairs: staff intensively lobby township leaders to be sent down to a 'good' village as they hope it will lead to promotion to a better remunerated and less taxing post and enhance their prospects of career promotion; township leaders routinely interfere in village elections, and replacements for 'failed' village leaders invariably have a strong backer in the township government, usually a well-placed relative; meanwhile, higher levels of government (e.g. county) often use political and economic incentives and promises, such as promotion to a good county bureau and reaping personal financial rewards, to push township leaders to attract investment. It reveals that the common pursuit of self-interests is a key factor for the prevalent personal and informal practices within the Chinese governments.

Such an entrenched set of principles, norms and culture is also strong in the higher education administration. Although government officials mostly manage non-profit public goods and generally lack direct financial incentives, they do place much focus on other personal interests, such as career promotions, personal influence, and personal relationships (M. Yang, 2003b, p. 22). Many have prioritised their own interests over the new rules and professional standards. For instance, to ensure their career promotion, they obey their superiors and keep their mouths shut, even if the superiors' decisions have broken institutional rules. Universities, on the other hand, have economic incentives to exploit the human and informal factors in the system. This creates a vicious cycle in the government process and organisational structure, further strengthening informal, personal practices in the system. As Tu states, in the process of government institutionalisation, all involved parties are actors of interest, including political organisations, administrative departments and officials, and policy consultants. They have the tendency to pursue and maximise their interests, which likely leads to a 'tragedy of the commons' in the public education sector (Tu, 2006, p. 65).¹²⁵

Third, the rule enforcement and execution processes are highly inconsistent, unstable and unpredictable (S. Li, 2004, pp. 39-40; S. Sun, 2002, pp. 1-2). If the new rules affect their personal interests, such as power, career, and resources, individual actors are likely to resist or bend these new rules and preserve the existing power structure and practices (Zou, 2014, p. 23). According to Kotter, there is an implicit 'psychological contract' between individuals and an organisation, which is formed based on personal cognitions, and specifies the mutual expectations of gives and returns (reciprocity) in the relationships. Actors adjust their behaviour and decisions according to the psychological contract and outcomes (e.g., interest, penalty or promotion) (Kotter, 1973, p. 92). Likewise, officials form a psychological contract with the government, which specifies their responsibilities as well as predicted rewards or punishments. When the government introduces new rules that undermine some officials' existing interests and cause a mismatch between their expected and actual returns, a sense of interest deprivation and the resistance of new institutions will arise (Zou, 2014, p. 22). This will directly affect officials' execution and enforcement of the new policies. Officials compromise and manipulate the execution of new rules to preserve and reinforce their personal interests in the governmental processes (S. Li, 2004, pp. 40-41; X. Liu, 2007, p. 10; S. Sun, 2002, p. 2).

¹²⁵ Since Garrett Hardin's article in *Science* (Hardin, 1968, pp. 1243-1248), the expression 'the tragedy of the commons' has been used to symbolise the degradation and depletion of common resource to be expected whenever many individuals use a scarce resource in common. These individuals, acting independently and rationally according to each one's self-interest, behave contrary to the whole group's long-term best interests. Also see Elinor Ostrum, *Governing the Commons* (Ostrum, 1990).

Implications for universities

Paradoxically, this imperfectly institutionalised central system has created both challenges and opportunities for universities. The top-down, central-planning model of intervention restrains universities' autonomy and hinders their long-term missions and scholarly nature. Policy processes and decisions shaped by personal and informal factors are unpredictable and biased, undermining the integrity and quality of the policies and causing unfairness, inequity and instability in the sector. Institutions feel insecure and have increasingly focused on game playing and government affairs to seek competitive advantages, aligning themselves to the bureaucratic system to the detriment of academic work (D. He et al., 2013, p. 92).¹²⁶

For instance, universities resort to informal, covert means to influence policy decisions and seek competitive advantages. They secure and increase resources by currying favour with the funding allocation executors. By the same token, many academics pay more attention to cultivating ties with influential officials to secure their career development than to producing serious scholarship, as the prevalent bureaucratisation has fuelled the desire for official ranks among academics (Yeung, 2011). According to Philip Altbach, Chinese scholars have to continuously make things fit into 'appropriate' structures and bureaucratic ways of thinking. He suggests that due to the enduring Chinese academic culture, the fast rising Chinese universities will soon reach a 'glass ceiling', which may inhibit them from reaching the top of the global rankings and achieving their full potential for academic excellence (Altbach, 2016). Rui Yang also points out that the traditional, toxic academic culture in China (e.g., *guanxi*, cronyism, and corruption) has 'devastating effects on its higher education development and the entire nation's modernisation, leading to distortion and inefficiency of institutions and the system' (R. Yang, 2015, pp. 532-533; 2016).

Yet, informal and personal factors in the system provide opportunities and a space of flexibility for universities to intervene and manipulate the governmental processes, given the lack of formal institutions in the system for bottom-up initiatives and policy advocacy (Chapter 1). By exploiting the informal, personal factors and fissures in the system, universities access opportunistic paths to voice views and exert influence to advance their interests. As a university executive pointed out, 'Where there is a will, there is always a way ... even though on paper it looks impossible to influence some issues.' For instance, universities take

¹²⁶ For instance, universities have aligned their internal organisational structure and personnel system with the administrative structure and official ranks of government agencies: administrative offices and personnel within universities, rather than academics, often hold important decision powers, such as on internal resources allocation. This means that even within the universities, academic powers are constrained by administrative forces.

advantage of their *guanxi* with individual officials and policy consultations to influence policy outcomes, and to propose ideas and advocate policies that support their interests.

University strategies for the semi-institutionalised system

The capacity of universities to adapt and prosper in such a complex bureaucratic setting largely depends on their accumulation and deployment of three specific forms of social and cultural capital. These are the most significant aspects of the universities' toolkit and tactics: mobilising human factors (e.g., personal connections, alumni networks and intelligence gathering), rational persuasion through knowledge (e.g., presenting evidence and third-party endorsement), and involvement in local policy experimentation (e.g., policy innovation to force a new policy and leading by example). A combination of these tactics is common.

Mobilising human factors

For the purpose of this chapter, 'mobilising human factors' (*dongyong renwei yinsu* 动用人为因素) broadly refers to 'universities exploiting the personal relationships and attributes of individuals involved in the governmental processes to interact with them informally and achieve certain policy goals'. According to interviewees, this frequent and expedient strategy has a direct impact on officials' decision-making and policy outcomes. Although the practices of 'mobilising human factors' are highly contingent, irregular and covert and exist in many forms, 'private, informal interactions' and 'personal connections' (*guanxi*) remain two core elements in most lobbying scenarios.

To illustrate how universities mobilise human factors, here I focus on three common aspects and practices: bottom-up communications, intelligence seeking, and decision shortcuts.

First, university leaders and personnel raise policy concerns and propose ideas directly to the government officials through initiating informal, private communications and organising personal, casual social activities, such as meals and drinks. According to university executives, an informal, private and relaxing environment eliminates psychological barriers, helps the officials understand and absorb the universities' opinions better, as well as encouraging them to sympathise, accept and endorse the proposals. This is especially effective when the officials have not formed a definite view or plan on a specific policy issue, so they are more 'absorbent, open-minded and susceptible to universities' advice and influence'. One university executive said, 'Through socialising and small talks, we have continually and diplomatically implanted our ideas and views into the government officials' minds without any resistance.' A salient component of such interactions is personal relationships. 'A good *guanxi* will make many things a lot easier,' as a university president described. A university director shared with me his experience:

We are very good friends with many chiefs of sections and offices (*chuzhang* 处长) who are directly responsible for drafting and implementing concrete national policies at [Ministry X]. We call each other brothers and sisters sometimes. We often reach consensus and conclusions when we catch up privately at dinners, where they could make swift policy decisions and seal the deal.

A vice president also pointed out:

With good *guanxi* and familiarity, officials are more patient, attentive and willing to listen, take you more seriously personally, and provide more opportunities and support. Instead of a regular 15-minute meeting, they will give me 50 minutes with full attention. All of these little things can make a huge difference in the end.

Second, universities gather intelligence from government officials through personal connections and private interactions.¹²⁷ Through *guanxi*, universities often obtain intelligence ahead of others, including updates and specifics of draft policies, early knowledge on forthcoming policy opportunities and funding, political advice on special access to key decision-makers at the central bureaucracy for particular policies, and even confidential information, such as national shortlists, quotas, selection criteria, priority fields of funding, proposal details from rivalry institutions, and anonymous expert panel members of the advisory committees.

These practices are often near or cross the boundary of legality, and both government officials and universities are aware that they go against the formal rules and ethics. Yet, the risks of being exposed and negative consequences remain low, and the incentives and rewards are too significant to resist. The intelligence provides universities with substantial competitive advantages and a strategic position in major national competitive programs, facilitating them to effectively intervene the official proceedings and influence the outcomes. Several interviewees noted that these practices are ‘a dark, dodgy side of university lobbying’.

Guanxi plays a key role in such interactions. The ‘prying’ universities that frequently mobilise their good *guanxi* with officials are advantaged. Universities that are less proactive or less well-

¹²⁷ In practice, seeking intelligence from the government contains a few levels and depths of meaning. Level one is public news, which is normally accessible from media sources, official announcements and policy documentations. Level two is oral, informal messages and advice, which is released from the pre-policy consultations or non-public sessions before the central agencies issue their formal policy handbooks. Level three is secretive intelligence, which refers to confidential information should not be shared but may be revealed to connected universities by officials. The availability and access to level two oral messages/advice and level three special intelligence depend on universities’ efforts, proactivity and networks.

connected tend to miss out and fall behind. An interviewee gave me an example of his University K. A few years ago, the central government released a new national policy which would support and fund new research centres in a particular field. The government ran two nationwide selections, which involved many formal proceedings such as expert advisory panels and public consultations. University K, widely known as the best-performing and top-ranking institution in the related research fields, submitted an application with impressive supporting materials and convincing evidence, such as quality rankings and research outputs. However, to K's surprise and humiliation, it was quickly eliminated from the first selection round and defeated by many other less impressive competitors. K's university executives immediately investigated this case, liaised with the relevant government officials, and discovered their biggest mistake. The interviewee explained:

While other institutions actively mobilised their *guanxi*, sought intelligence, and exerted influence, we did not actively seek information or network with the officials in charge of the policy, as we were very confident about our leading position. However, we fell out of the government official's radar! Funding spots were quickly filled up and earmarked for other institutions, whilst we got eliminated despite being the number one candidate.

K's university executives learnt their lesson. The university president soon deployed his own *guanxi* connections, and gathered intelligence privately about the policy details and rivalries for the next round of selection. K's other personnel also acted proactively, networking with the decision-makers through informal channels. With the same application materials, they quickly received the intelligence that they secured a top spot.

Third, university leaders privately engage with senior government officials and key decision-makers (even national leaders) to seek policy decision shortcuts and personal support on important issues, such as lifting restrictions and granting special permissions/exemptions, overruling earlier unfavourable decisions, and customising new programs to meet their special institutional needs.¹²⁸ According to Dittmer and his associates, when the circumstances are not soluble through standard operating procedures, informal politics will permit the existing hierarchical monopoly to break down into more open and intense elite networking. Informal politics has also been critical for identifying and raising issues, for bringing new information to bear on the analysis of problems, and for proposing new policy recommendations. People can cut through or go around the bureaucratic organisations and procedures, taking new

¹²⁸ In Chapter 4, I have already discussed the significant personal authority of these officials in the central bureaucracy, and provided tactics and examples of such high-level, private policy interactions.

information or policy proposals quickly to the highest levels and sometimes getting immediate decisions (Dittmer, Fukui, & Lee, 2000, pp. 162-163). This analysis is also true for university–government interactions.

According to my interviewees, this strategy is a ‘100% guarantee of a successful outcome’. For instance, a university vice president told me that his university M recently successfully secured over two billion yuan worth of the central government’s investment for its campus infrastructure construction. Both the university president and party secretary sought direct personal support from a senior official and key decision-maker via informal channels. The university leaders I interviewed suggested that they frequently visit senior government officials in person for lobbying activities of a similar nature.

A research department of a leading national university D was once at the edge of closedown due to its unsuccessful industrialisation. Its university leader was keen to save this dying research department. She came up with a new funding project idea and desperately tried to sell it to the government for immediate funding. Instead of going through the lengthy bureaucratic procedures and the notorious countersigning system, she mobilised her personal connections and arranged a private meeting with the then vice premier in charge of industry and manufacture who also led the NDRC. This personal meeting provided a significant opportunity for her to profile this department and convince the key decision-maker about the importance of this research project. She argued that if it was funded, it would drastically reduce China’s dependence on foreign technologies in that industry, because the department would be able to design them in China and turn them into homemade products. It would increase national pride and independence. The leader nodded and made the decision on the spot. This policy proposal was immediately fast-tracked and implemented. The university’s strategy revived the research department and attracted a significant investment.

A dean of undergraduate studies spent a long time lobbying several mid-level government officials, with the aim of receiving a special exemption that would lift a restrictive admissions policy for his university.¹²⁹ He initially received rejections. However, the whole situation turned around as soon as his university’s vice president phoned a high-ranked government official who was his old school friend. The vice president pleaded for his personal help and compassion, explaining the hardships that his university experienced and the enormous pressure and public complaints that it received from students and parents. The senior official

¹²⁹ The policy involved rigid regulations on the student numbers, internal selection and admissions for outstanding undergraduate students to enter a graduate program of the same university.

agreed, offered his support, and exercised his power for an immediate decision to approve this university's proposal as a special policy exemption.

Good *guanxi* between university leaders and senior officials is critical in this strategy. So are the links between the institutions and senior officials. Alumni relations serve as a significant tool for universities to connect with the government elites (I will elaborate further in the chapter). A vice university president told me that they connected with a top national leader because he was a university alumnus, adding that the national leader had provided support to his alma mater.

Guanxi building: strengthening ability to mobilise human factors

It becomes apparent that *guanxi* plays a vital role in university–government interactions, and universities with better *guanxi* networks are more likely to achieve their goals in the governmental processes. It helps universities gain face time with officials; it provides direct policy advocacy and intelligence-sharing channels; it helps ensure a decision will go in their favour; and it offers substantial personal support and endorsement. As Pan observes in the case of Tsinghua University, what makes Tsinghua's strategies workable is the close personal relationships between university leadership and government officials (Pan, 2007, p. 138).

It remains a central, long-term strategy for universities to expand and strengthen their *guanxi* networks formed by allies and personal ties.¹³⁰ How do they achieve it? In China, relationships are typically formed on the basis of commonality and shared attributes, or are initiated through an intermediary who has *guanxi* with both parties. As a norm of social interpersonal interactions and ethics of propriety, a sense of obligation (*renqing* 人情) derives from *guanxi* and is enhanced through the reciprocity of favours and continued interactions (Gao & Tian, 2006, p. 81; King, 1991; So & Walker, 2006, pp. 8-12; M. M.-h. Yang, 1994). University executives form *guanxi* with officials through common attributes, such as shared work experiences (current and former work associates), shared identities and memories in the

¹³⁰ The importance and emphasis on direct, personal connections are not unique to Chinese universities. University lobbyists from the US, for instance, also have such a focus. According to Robert Andringa, the most two important factors influencing federal education legislation in the US are 'personal judgment and values of members of Congress and staff', and 'strong views of respected and trusted friends'. In his view, the most effective lobbyist is the one who becomes that respected and trusted friend of a relatively small group of key legislators and their staff. This can be accomplished by developing a close rapport with members of the Congress and their staff, or a university president for government relations may take the lead to connect relevant member of the Congress (Andringa, 1976; Wolanin, 1998, pp. 60-61). Browne also suggests that in the US, maintaining positive relationships with lobbyists is a critically important goal of lobbying for state higher education lobbyists, often taking precedence over successfully advancing the higher education institution's policy position (Browne, 1985).

alumni networks (schoolmates), private life connections (kinships and friends of friends), and common interests (joint honour, credit and rewards for work performance). As noted in Chapter 2, the social and cultural respect for leading universities has facilitated university personnel to make friendly connections with officials at various levels with ease. Here I focus on the following three aspects of universities' *guanxi* building strategies at the individual and organisational levels.

First, university executives develop and strengthen relationships with officials by mixing business and personal affairs. For instance, through formal contacts and informal interactions, such as socialising at meals and drinks, and participating in party cadre training courses or secondment in Beijing, they turn official, formal work relationships into emotional and personal connections, so that 'public affairs' can be treated as 'personal affairs' (*ba gongshi biancheng sishi, ba sishi nazuo gongshi ban* 把公事变成私事, 把私事拿做公事办). According to my interviewees, many of their personal friendships with government officials started from formal work contacts and business relationships. During an extended period, they met regularly to discuss work, offered personal assistance and favours to officials when they were in need, and organised work and social activities. Increasingly, personal trust, bond and friendships grew, strengthened by the reciprocity of obligations and frequent communication. Importantly, such active friendship building often yields significant influence on the officials' attitude and handling of the formal business. An interviewee from University C explained:

I have become close friends with a number of my current and former work colleagues at the departments within [Ministry B, the central sponsoring body of C]. Our mutual trust and familiarity have improved our work interactions: they become more inclined to share internal information, accept our [C's] policy suggestions and requests, and protect our [C's] interests.

Second, universities expand and strengthen their connections and support networks through the two-way personnel mobility system between the central government and national universities. As illustrated in Chapters 1 and 2, the state controls the appointments and mobility of university leadership. Often, university executives of leading national institutions have served in the central government at a certain point of their career.¹³¹ They not only have extensive experience and knowledge of the government's internal operations, but also have personal links and direct access to state officials. The university executives capitalise these intangible assets to strengthen the political influence of their institutions, and facilitate two-way policy interactions. For example, the university president and party secretary of a leading

¹³¹ For further explanation and examples, see Footnote 94.

research university S are seen as a very effective and influential combo. A vice president from S told me:

Both our party secretary and president served senior positions at some key organs of the State Council in Beijing. They know how everything works at the central bureaucracy, have great connections and personal access to the government high-level officials. They are well informed, and can identify which person(s) we should network with on each specific issue.

Furthermore, under this two-way personnel mobility system, the university executives of leading institutions are often sent back to the government to fill important positions. Recent examples include the presidents-turned ministers, vice ministers and party secretaries at the MoST, MoE and MEP.¹³² This prospect seems to impact on the attitude and psychology of current government officials with whom university executives interact. The government officials show a lot of attention and respect to these university leaders who may become their superiors in the future. This expedites the *guanxi* building between universities and officials.

The following example demonstrates how a leading university T in a southern city took advantage of the two-way mobility mechanism and strengthened their institutional links and personal *guanxi* with Beijing, despite having no control over the appointments of university leadership. That year, T's party secretary was about to retire. To ensure T would continue to prosper, she mobilised her ties with state officials and lobbied the government on the appointment of her successor in the university. Based on the operational 'rules' or 'pattern' of Chinese cadre mobility (*ganbu yunzuo guilü* 干部运作规律), she pleaded that she wished to 'receive a Beijing-based senior cadre to lead T', preferably one that 'had worked at powerful, resourceful national government bodies'. As a result, the central government appointed a senior official from a high-power organ at the State Council to fill the role. The new party secretary has since evidently brought political influence and networks to the university, leading to increased government funding and favourable policies for T over the recent years.

Universities also use secondment to build relationships and develop networks between university personnel and government officials at various levels. As illustrated in Chapter 1, universities, especially those located outside of Beijing, are keen to fill secondment positions and send their own people to the central government to gather intelligence and develop personal connections. The university staff on secondment often serve as an ambassador,

¹³² For specific examples, see Footnote 48.

messenger and negotiator in the government for their own universities. However, secondment opportunities are also subject to the influence of *guanxi*. A university director observed:

People are a key factor ... Secondment means that you have your own people working at the ministry every day, watching every step of the way, and making connections with officials. Secondment in theory is a public and fair matter, but again, officials often choose their trusted and familiar friends and pick the institutions they have *guanxi* with to fill these roles.

Meanwhile, this strategy applies in the other direction too. Universities bring in and hire people with official links, posts and influence. Since the late 1990s, according to Yeung, top Chinese institutions have invested much time and money recruiting famous professors or scientists with impressive official titles, such as academicians who are also members of the government's funding bodies or academic assessment panels. This is not just to bolster their standing. Such recruitments are often intended to cultivate useful personal ties and facilitate future funding (Yeung, 2011).

Third, universities capitalise their alumni relationships to strengthen personal ties and influence with the government.¹³³ Especially, high-ranking universities foster political, economic, academic and social leaders in various fields, which provide a powerful support base. Alumni links represent a sense of family ties, shared identity, collectiveness, obligations, and affections for their schools and universities where they spent their memorable years studying and working (W. Huang et al., 2005, pp. 32-33; Wei, 2008, pp. 148-153; Xie, 2010, pp. 27-29; X. Yan, 2011, p. 312).

During my fieldwork, numerous interviewees explained how the former graduates of their universities, especially the ones that now hold important positions at the central bureaucracy, have maintained regular contacts and close interactions with their alma maters, and how these connections have provided competitive advantages and expedient favours to the universities. A former official from the finance department of a central ministry admitted to me in private that it is common amongst his government colleagues to favour their alma maters on policies. He had helped his university secure funding resources when he was working there. He added, 'As an alumni member who spent many years of my life working at that university, I certainly would provide support when I could.' According to University R, a national leader once dropped a hint privately to its university president, 'If R [his alma mater] requires my support, come and ask before I retire.' In another university, a director who works

¹³³ In this thesis, alumni networks can be broadly defined as 'students, graduates and staff from a certain school or university'.

for the government on national talent programs has observed that one department of a central ministry always invites policy consultants from one particular university in Beijing for expert advice and selection panels. The university has benefited from its heavy involvement in these policy decisions. He explained that it is a well-known story of nepotism: many of the ministry's chiefs come from that university. A number of interviewees also suggested that alumni networks have seemed to play an important role in the Project 985: several national leaders had helped secure a place for their alma maters despite controversy.

When a national leader undertook an official inspection visit to Province S and met its governor in person, he was unimpressed that the governor did not organise a tour to his old university on the trip. He specifically requested it to be included in his itinerary, and hinted that this university needed more support from its provincial government. Soon after the visit, the governor suddenly announced a special investment in this institution for its development. This story was shared by an interviewee who involved in the official visit and witnessed the private interactions.

Universities also actively utilise alumni links to exert influence. For example, according to an informant who witnessed the story, a leading university M sent a private petition letter to a national leader (a former national premier) who graduated from the university. This letter, with the university's logo and letterhead, was carefully handwritten and personally delivered to the national leader by his old teacher. The letter started, 'Dear Premier, I have a few urgent policy matters to report to you ...' The insider who witnessed this event suggested, 'This approach was very emotional and effective, drew immediate personal attention from a powerful leader, and saw immediate action by the government.'

Universities highly value these alumni links, and deploy strategies and activities to strengthen alumni ties and loyalty. Tsinghua, for instance, has fostered their alumni who are occupying elite positions in the central government and in various social sectors. The institution maintains strong relationships and psychological bonds with its former students and staff through active contacts and regular events (S. Kang & Liu, 2005; C. Li, 1994; W. Lin et al., 2005; Pan, 2007, p. 130). For example, it invited Zhu Rongji, a then national leader and Tsinghua alumnus to be an honorary dean, which later helped Tsinghua receive special government support on related policy (Pan, 2007, pp. 135-137). In 2011, Tsinghua invited its alumnus, the then national President Hu Jintao, to speak at its centenary anniversary where Hu announced a new national funding project, the 2011 Scheme, a policy proposal submitted by Tsinghua. Numerous interviewees suggested to me that due to its powerful network and extensive support base, Tsinghua is perhaps the most politically influential university in China, and 'often finds it easy to excise an influence and seek the state's support'.

Although alumni links are significant and influential, it remains challenging to prove, trace or illustrate the irregular and covert interactions between universities and their alumni in the government, especially at the elite level. A vice president pointed out:

We all are well aware of some famous university alumni, such as the former and current presidents and premiers, and how their significant political influence and decision-making authority have benefited their alma maters. It is widely known and discussed in higher education sector that [K, a national university] went to seek personal help from its famous alumnus [Q, a national vice president and party leader] in order to be selected into a large national funding program and [K] succeeded. We all agree that that alumni relationship and nepotism have played an important role in this policy decision, but it is difficult to prove or demonstrate their behind-the-scenes interactions.

Another interviewee also suggested to me:

I often attend government meetings on national policies in Beijing, and catch up with various university colleagues and friends who are alumni from other national universities. When we meet and chat in private, many of them always say that [University N] has great political influence and policy support due to its alumni links and the extensive presence of its graduates at the central government, but they could not explain further or give me more details.

Scientific persuasion

Sometimes the *guanxi* networks of a university alone are enough to get its arguments listened to and accepted by the government. However, in many other cases, one may need to have its argument and position reinforced by ‘scientific persuasion’. Here, ‘scientific persuasion’ generally refers to ‘cognitive persuasion and rational negotiation to construct a convincing and compelling story to stir the mind with reasonable truth.’ This strategy is typically employed to explain and justify rationally policy messages and arguments, and convince officials to personally endorse their ideas with full confidence; this is especially true of complex and technical issues involving professional knowledge and expertise. Research analysis, for instance, is a component of scientific persuasion in educating officials and shaping their views.

An interviewee shared his experience with me on the importance of scientific persuasion:

Having good *guanxi* with decision-makers is very important during lobbying—they will listen to your problems and proposals carefully and seriously, and act in your favour. But sometimes, good *guanxi* alone are not sufficient, especially when the matters are complex, or when you have a wobbly case on which officials feel hesitant to take a risk and decide. One needs to structure sound reasons and flawless arguments, illustrate all

the strengths and capabilities of your proposal, organise appropriate paperwork, make constructive suggestions, and very importantly, show them the common interests and benefits that may flow from their support. This will maximise one's chances of success.

To a certain extent, scientific persuasion in the lobbying process seems to reflect and target the institutionalised components of governmental procedures. The government faces external pressure to increase its accountability, transparency and fairness for its policy decisions, and it also has growing needs for universities' technical and scientific input into the development of sensible policies, not only on education. Universities' scientific persuasion offers officials the rationale, legitimacy and justifications for their decisions (despite common personal and informal interferences), especially when they may face challenges and scepticism from other stakeholders within the sector and society. University executives suggested that scientific persuasion in fact benefits both sides of the lobbying game. A vice president said:

It is increasingly important for the government decision-makers to make accountable judgements and use their discretion and authority appropriately. The more decision-making power one has, the more wary one should be. Ministers, for instance, all fear that a bunch of universities contest or accuse them of nepotism or unfairness if their decisions are affecting these universities' interest. Their reputation, authority and career will be put on the line. Hence, it really helps and protects both sides if universities give the officials good reasons and personal confidence for supporting your proposals or favouring you in policy decisions.

So how do universities persuade officials rationally? Here I focus on the following three aspects of universities' practices.

Evidence and analysis

Universities typically deploy a scientific approach, such as presenting data, facts and research analysis, to provide rational and credible explanations and construct their arguments. This is especially useful when intense rivalry is involved, such as competing for a special funding place with other research universities of similar quality, *guanxi* and influence. As a university executive suggested, in such situations, 'One needs to demonstrate its scientific nature and stand out in the crowd as the superior option.'

Constructing a 'flawless story' is imperative to pre-empt, predict and address all the possible counterarguments and loopholes that may be raised by officials themselves and by other rival universities. An interviewee outlined, 'The first key step is to convince myself first and make a nearly perfect case, with any potential gaps, doubts, contests or weakness having been taken into account prior to my meetings with officials.' In addition, 'telling a unique, exceptional

story' is also necessary to gain officials' personal sympathy and understanding. One interviewee said that in one case, his university's circumstances and arguments were so exceptional and compelling that the government officials could not reject and other universities simply could not imitate or compare.

PKU successfully sought the government's permission to run a triple-badged international PhD degree program in bio-medical and material fields as the first and only program of this kind in China. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the state centralises the accreditation of all academic degrees in China and imposes the strict rule of 'one degree—one stamp', which does not allow jointly badged degrees.¹³⁴ PKU, on one hand mobilised its *guanxi* within the government to promote their ideas to key decision-makers; on the other, it provided sound supporting materials to minimise officials' concerns on the possible risks, including recommendation letters from influential professors and foreign experts, a signed agreement with foreign partners on credit recognition and transfers, financial funding assurance from an overseas foundation to cover the travel costs of all supervisors and students, as well as the track records and testimonials of students and supervisors. The program later received a special exemption by the State Council's Academic Degrees Committee.

University Q once lobbied its sponsoring central ministry P to offer a special international scholarship fund.¹³⁵ The goal was to improve Q's international PhD student recruitment. University E, another affiliated university of the ministry P, received this intelligence from their friends in the ministry and decided to seek a share of the fund from P. Besides mobilising human factors and networking informally, E also provided the paperwork to argue that P should provide international PhD recruitment funding to E too. The materials included data and facts on the capacity of the university, such as history, world rankings, academic disciplines and programs, facilities, staff, and the composition of current international students. It also contained explanations about why it needed the funding, how the money would be spent, and what benefits it would provide to P and E. E explained that as a leading national university handpicked by the government leaders in 1999 to 'build a world-class research institution in China', it needed P's support to internationalise the institution and meet the national goal. The outcomes, such as improvements in academic quality and output,

¹³⁴ As discussed in Chapter 2, in China, undergraduate and postgraduate academic degrees are centrally regulated, authorised and awarded. The conferral of degrees needs the government's approval or accreditation in order to be valid. Each validated Chinese degree certificate only allows a single official stamp by the MoE. Therefore, multi-badged, combined degrees (i.e., stamps by two or more institutions on a single degree certificate) are not accepted or legitimate in the Chinese government's standards.

¹³⁵ This fund provides 50,000 yuan (around USD 10,000) per student admin fee to S annually.

diversity of students, education and research, and global reputation, would also promote the overall performance and profile of the sponsoring ministry P in the central government. To predict and eliminate P's other concerns, E also proactively submitted a budget of proposed funds, estimated expenditures and deliverables. In the end, P could not find a reason to reject this proposal but agreed to allocate some of the scholarship funding to E.

Rhetoric

Rhetorical language remains a key tactic of persuasion. Universities typically deploy references to national leaders' established plans, commitments, principles, directives and slogans to legitimise and frame their claims, and to remind the officials of the top-level commands, their obligations, and assigned responsibilities. Their persuasive normative language includes 'meeting national and public interests', 'delivering the national 12th Five-year Plan', 'building a knowledge economy', 'revitalising Western China' and 'developing world-class universities'.

University L, for example, lobbied its central sponsoring ministry for a new policy on university infrastructure investment in international education and student accommodation. As part of its rational analysis, L claimed that the development goal listed in the 'national 12th Five-year Plan' required L to significantly increase its internationalisation and double the number of international students over the next five years to 2,500; however its current capacity was only 1,000. In addition, L must provide new and safe on-campus dormitories for international students with good living conditions to promote soft diplomacy and prevent any safety and health related incidents. L vigorously argued that such incidents would 'cause national embarrassment, damage national pride and global reputation, and might even strain China's international relationships'. The ministry approved the new policy proposal.

The C9 group once made coordinated efforts to successfully persuade government officials to lift some restrictions for C9 universities through a joint policy reform trial. The goal was to increase their autonomy in PhD recruitment numbers and methods. Apart from presenting data, facts and policy analysis, the C9 members kept reminding these officials that they had the moral support and backing of the top leaders who handpicked them to 'build Chinese world-class universities' as a national strategic priority. They claimed that the current policy restrictions of PhD admissions severely hindered universities' development and undermined their fulfilment of the national goals and missions. They pleaded that it was an obligation and responsibility for the central divisions and officials in charge of the policy to support these universities' endeavours, alter the policy parameters, and deliver the leaders' directives. There would be 'negative consequences' if the relevant departments did not make the changes soon. The officials later modified the policy terms for C9 universities.

Meanwhile, universities typically disguise their self-interested intentions and motives, and frame their claims by highlighting potential win-win outcomes, especially the benefits for the government. A university's party secretary who successfully influenced numerous policies in favour of his institution has always maintained a patriotic, nationalistic image in the lobbying process and persistently promoted his policy proposals as 'for the best interests of the government and the nation'.

A leading university's vice president effectively persuaded the government to increase its policy support for a research industry Z (his research area) by manipulating rhetoric. As a 'spokesperson' of both his university and his research field, he seized an interview opportunity with some government journalists who wrote articles for '*Internal reference*' (*neican* 内参) on university research.¹³⁶ In addition to presenting technical facts and evidence to support his case, he told the journalists that 'national Z industry was facing serious threats and invasions by foreign countries', 'China-made products would likely encounter deadly crisis', and 'China's national interests would be severely damaged if the government does not step up, make a timely decision, and set up national standards and funding for Z'. He admitted to me that he employed those words purposely to 'create a strong sense of national crisis and emergency'. As he expected, the government journalists were deeply convinced and decided to report on this 'urgent national matter' immediately. As a result, that *neican* article on Z received attention and reactions by high-level officials on this issue.

Another university executive explained to me how rhetoric increases a university's influence in government consultations:

The government will approach you and trust your advice more if you have a big-picture, public interest mentality and image, and your advice sounds more objective and representing broader interests. When proposing ideas and offering advice, if you always give the impression that you only care about your own interests, it will likely backfire ... Officials say that we [his university] are more impartial, unbiased and less self-interested comparing to many other universities, so they often come to us and ask for our advice on new policy plans in the first instance. It places us [his university] at an advantageous, favourable position.

¹³⁶ As mentioned earlier, '*internal reference*' (known as *neican* 内参 or *guonei dongtai qingyang* 国内动态清样) is an internally circulated newspaper and special government media channel within the government and read by the leadership. It is important to note that Chinese universities generally focus more on direct communications with government officials, including through *neican*, rather than engage with the mass media to expose issues and influence public views, since it is the government who holds the real power.

Collectively, PKU and Tsinghua successfully lobbied a government agency for a special policy exemption and greater autonomy, which allowed them both to use the research training program funds freely without the spending limits that were applied to all institutions.¹³⁷ An interviewee who was involved in the lobbying process said:

We repeatedly stressed to the government that it was not for our special interests, this was for the national interests, such as retaining top talent and building strong human capital for China. Our two institutions wanted to have the discretion to optimise the use of the funding, so that we could, for instance, invest more on training and retaining our top students in China rather than funding them to study overseas and losing them to foreign countries. A brain drain would cause long-term damage to our country ... It was important to remove the policy restrictions and support our autonomy and strategies, for the sake of China.

Since officials commonly take their personal interests into consideration when making decisions, university executives also often highlight the personal rewards and career benefits that government officials may potentially gain, so as to convince them that it is in their best interest to support them. Such potential rewards and benefits may include praise from their upper-level superiors on excellent ideas, performance and outputs, expanded personal and professional influence, profile and networks, as well as credits and appreciation from their alma maters.

Third-party endorsement and allies

A 'third-party endorsement' is typically provided by actors other than the lobbyists and government officials. For instance, the story about industry Z and *neican* in this chapter displays the importance of the third-party endorsement of journalists as a mouthpiece. Strong endorsement and recommendations from foreign experts and international partners also give rise to a soft diplomacy effect, and may help persuade the government.

As the Chinese government strives to strengthen its national competitiveness and power in the global settings, it observes and imitates foreign practices as its world-level benchmarks and advanced models. In their study of the development of social security policy, for instance, Lin and Kangas find that the state elite's outward learning about the international experiences of

¹³⁷ Under the existing, rigid policy, each university was only allowed to use 50% of the funding to support Chinese students to undertake joint PhD training (i.e., a double degree with two separate certificates issued by a Chinese university and a foreign institution); the other 50% had to be spent on sending their students overseas to undertake a PhD program solely at a foreign institution. The two elite universities successfully lobbied the government for removing the fixed percentages for using such funds.

social policy reform has made a great impact on governmental policymaking. The advocates from international organisations like the International Labour Organization and the World Bank also played a role in influencing the policymaking (K. Lin & Kangas, 2006, p. 72). My interviewees observe that government has increased international comparison studies, and has even started to invite foreign experts and advisors to its policy consultation processes.

Chinese universities take advantage of this attitude of the state, and add 'international endorsement' to their persuasion by involving their foreign partners and supporters. PKU and Tsinghua, for example, often mobilise their foreign trained professors and/or returnees to organise joint letters to key officials, including national councillors and education ministers, to support their universities' policy proposals and new trials and urge the government to approve them.

The rapid globalisation has heightened the need for transnational collective action (Sandler, 2004, pp. 43-44). As illustrated in Chapter 3, the C9 group has also used 'external forces' to 'push things forward' by inviting higher education experts and foreign universities groups, such as Australia's Group of Eight (Go8),¹³⁸ to speak at their meetings in front of government officials and media outlets and talk about the benefits of establishing university groups and their contributions to the nation and sector. Another example is the Hefei Statement on the 'ten characteristics of contemporary research universities'.¹³⁹ In October 2013, by joining the Hefei Statement signatory group with other international partners, including Go8, AAU, and LERU, the C9 increased their collective voice and jointly promoted a supportive policy environment for research-intensive universities in China.

¹³⁸ As noted in Chapter 2, in October 2008, for instance, the C9 presidents held their annual internal meeting in Hangzhou. One meeting agenda for discussion was to formally establish a C9 group and develop a set of group principles and operational guidelines. Go8 Executive Director Michael Gallagher was invited to participate in the private C9 presidents' meeting in the presence of the then education vice minister in 2008. He made a presentation and shared experience on how the Go8 was established and operated, how it worked with the Australian federal government, as well as how valuable and important it was to the development of the nation and higher education sector. It was well received by the audience. In the end of that meeting, the group 'C9' or 'Consortium of China Nine Research Universities' (*zhongguo jiuxiao xiaozhang lianxi huiyi* 中国九校联席会议) was named and privately endorsed by the vice minister.

¹³⁹ Hefei Statement's formal title is 'Hefei Statement on the Ten Characteristics of Contemporary Research Universities' (Go8 et al., 2013).

Local policy experiments and pilot trials

Another important aspect of universities' lobbying strategy is policy innovation and experimentation.¹⁴⁰ This strategy is commonly used by universities to seek special privileges and exemptions, push the policy boundaries, and increase autonomy in the restrictive, contested policy space that I called the 'contention zone' (Chapter 2).

The government exercises tight control over certain higher education policy areas depending on the perceived levels of political risks and potential social 'chaos' and instability. For instance, national university student admissions involve a huge number of citizens.¹⁴¹ With a constant fear that 'if something goes wrong, it may lead to significant, nationwide discontent and political and social challenges', the state has imposed rigid rules to regulate universities' practices and constrain their autonomy in this area.

Based on this logic and mentality of the state, university executives believe that they may be able to seek special considerations and policy exemptions if they can convince the government that it is 'safe and beneficial' to do so. Therefore, proposing local, small-scale policy experiments and conducting new policy trials that 'affect only a few people' have become an effective strategy for universities to demonstrate the 'win-win outcomes' and 'low risks of troubles'. An interviewee said:

In the vast higher education sector, there should be some principles and standard thresholds for everyone, but there should also be special policies for some players. Over the last decades, the universities and government officials have formed a consensus about this view. The government has agreed to set some 'special rules and exceptions' and 'allow specific institutions to try and do it first', which may expand to other institutions later if successful ... We universities often refer to our 'special policy exceptions or trials' as 'innovative reforms'.

¹⁴⁰ Some may see policy experimentation as a means of scientific persuasion. Because successful practice and implementation during policy trials may be used as evidence to prove that universities' policy proposals and ideas are feasible, effective and beneficial, and seeing the result, the government may feel assured that it can trust and continue such new policy or practice. For example, universities often use PKU and Tsinghua's successful policy experiments as evidence and examples to help their own universities seek similar special policies. However, initiating a new policy trial or experimentation is often a lobbying goal and strategy in itself, which facilitates universities to gain more autonomy and resources.

¹⁴¹ The student recruitment policy applies to both the university entrance exams and student admissions quotas (see Chapter 2). Due to the large scale of the Chinese higher education system, this policy involves a huge number of Chinese citizens. Based on the MoE statistics in December 2014, for example, China had 1,793,953 postgraduate students and 24,680,726 undergraduates enrolled at a regular higher education institution in 2013 (MoE, 2014f).

Policy experimentation has a long tradition in China. Sebastian Heilmann has observed an unorthodox combination of novel policy experimentation with long-term policy prioritisation in China over the last few decades in the economy, which is characterised by ‘foresighted tinkering’ (Heilmann, 2009). Such an approach is in fact commonly seen and well developed in education policies. For the government, policy experiments and trials have become a safe means to maintain stability and avoid mishaps, because the ‘small, local experimentation’ approach reduces prematurity, affects limited stakeholders, and lowers the risks of accidents and predicaments in such a vast, diverse country. If a policy is proved successful by one or a few institutions allowed to test it, the state may allow or encourage its broader application across other institutions. Some describe this as ‘a good reflection of Deng Xiaoping thinking and economic reform strategy in the education policy arena, just like the national special economy zones’. Many argue that this approach provides win-win outcomes and common interests for both the government and universities.

A range of interviewees suggested that their universities have been highly proactive and persuasive in initiating and proposing new opportunities to government officials. One interviewee said:

We typically plead [to the government] that we really want to contribute and sacrifice ourselves to test out this particular policy as ‘guinea pigs’ for our government and nation, and that we have all the required conditions and capabilities, and we are prepared and enthusiastic to explore the new model. We emphasise [to the government] that this will not only help us, but also help the government verify the practicality and rationality of the new policy. Let’s test it out and review the possible problems. If it does not work, it will only be a local issue with a minimal impact; if it works, we can help improve and perfect it, and gradually introduce and promote it to a wider scale. This is so-called ‘muddling through’ (*mo shitou guohe* 摸石头过河). This is a win-win for both sides ... Our policy experiment proposals are often well received [by the government].

The C9 members, for instance, pushed for a greater PhD student admission quota by initiating and promoting a special policy trial only at the nine universities. In the end, they received special permission for a 10% annual increase (a much greater allowance than other universities) in exchange for an increased efficiency with non-performing students. This was seen as a significant success in a policy area that had long been off limits for any negotiation. As an interviewee heavily involved in the policy trial suggested, this special policy trial ‘opened the door’ to greater flexibility and incremental reform for the future. Once the government

develops a habitual thinking (*guanxing siwei* 惯性思维), it will lead to a long-term, regular increase. He added:

Our universities will continue to negotiate and push for a larger increase each year—10% this time and 20% the next. This policy [trial] has helped increase the autonomy in this area for other national universities too and ultimately benefited the entire sector.

Shidian and *shiyān*

In the education policy arena, there are two similar types of policy experimentation and trials, *shidian* (试点, experimental point or pilot project), and *shiyān* (试验, test, experiment or trial).¹⁴² University interviewees stress that they may need to differentiate these two terms when applying for the government's approval. Universities have been actively involved in both types of policy experimentation to obtain a greater autonomy and competitive advantages.

'*Shidian*' usually refers to a government-led initiative, although the original idea may come from either the government or universities, or both.¹⁴³ The government selects and allows several pilot institutions to enjoy a policy exemption or to test a new policy at a local scale. A good example is the pilots for the autonomous student selection and admissions reform (*zizhu xuanba luqu gaige shidian* 自主选拔录取改革试点) (MoE, 2013a). The MoE nominated several pilot institutions (*shidian xianxing* 试点先行) to test new *gaokao* and admissions policies to minimise the potential risks and disruptive errors. The government retains its control over the pace and process of such pilots. If successful, the government is likely to gradually introduce the policy to broader regions in an orderly and prudent manner (MoE, 2014b; Xinhuanet, 2014c).

This policymaking methodology resembles what Heilmann has described as 'proceeding point to surface' (*you dian dao mian* 由点到面). Heilmann observes that the Chinese point-to-surface approach entails a policy process that is initiated from individual 'experimental points' (*shidian*) and driven by local initiative with the formal or informal backing of higher-level policymakers. If judged conducive by the government, the 'model experiences' from the initial experiments will be disseminated, refined and expanded to more and more regions (Heilmann,

¹⁴² Worth noting that *shidian* and *shiyān* have a blurry line, such that both may co-exist and be present in a single trial case and share the same goals and deliverable outcomes. For instance, if the government and a university jointly develop a new policy idea and test it out at a local level, it may be labelled as either. In such circumstances, it is not important to differentiate or make a choice between the two types.

¹⁴³ There are cases where universities developed and raised new ideas to the government informally, and officials agreed to adopt them as a pilot project within a defined scope, and to guide and supervise their implementation at a local level. In cases like this, they are usually still categorised as a government-led initiative or *shidian*.

2008, pp. 2-4, 29-30). *Shidian* in the university sector has clearly reflected this point-to-surface approach.

Many new reforms and policy pilots in the 'contention zone' have first started at leading national universities, largely due to their proactivity in seeking opportunities and proposing ideas to the government, their strategic role in national development, as well as their reputation, ability and maturity to deliver them. The government also employs *shidian* to legitimatise and justify its favourable support for certain universities.

Chinese universities compete for participation in *shidian*. The MoE officials told some of my interviewees privately that they are under constant pressure to justify their decisions on issues such as the shortlists and finalists of *shidian* policy participants, and 'the cut-off line and the baseline thresholds'. A vice president stated:

Nowadays, when introducing a new special policy experimentation, the MoE often needs to explain how they determined the scope, selection criteria and pilot institutions for this policy. Because defining a scope and limit for a new policy will likely cause discontent and resistance from the universities below the threshold or near the margin. They often contest and break in by persistent lobbying and complaining. The MoE has to anticipate and prepare for these universities' strong feelings and pressure.

On the other hand, '*shiyān*' generally refers to the bottom-up policy trials and new experiments proposed, driven and led by universities themselves to push for greater autonomy, which may, or may not, have received the government's endorsement or approval. The C9 PhD admissions reform trial mentioned earlier is a good example. *Shiyān* is also more common for elite universities than low-tiered institutions, largely due to the former's influence and capacity for innovation.

Shiyān in the policy arena has not been well explored in the existing literature. If we say *shidian* is largely promoted by the government, then many *shiyān* cases are formally, or informally, tolerated by the state. The state may intervene and suspend a *shiyān* if it appears risky and troublesome. One interesting aspect of *shiyān* is how elite universities seek government's endorsement (or tolerance), interpret its attitude, and respond to it.

As Pan observes, the Chinese central government normally gives three possible responses to a policy proposal when there is no fixed state policy: approval, objection, and obscure silence (Pan, 2007, p. 136). Approval and objection are relatively straightforward answers. For instance, if the government expresses clear disapproval, a university cannot implement a new *shiyān* or continue its *shiyān* that is already in place. Before a new *shiyān*, universities typically attempt to persuade the government to give a formal consent or a private nod. PKU, for

example, successfully sought the MoE's special approval for China's first and only joint international PhD program (with the US's Georgia Tech) in the name of a small, local policy trial. Fudan University and SJTU proposed a special trial on regional student recruitment and received a special permission.

Interviewees from several universities admitted to me that they had already sought and received tacit agreement and permission from the state prior to their public announcement and implementation of their self-initiated *shiyān*, despite there appearing to be a lack of consultation with the government. One interviewee involved in several *shiyān* told me that they commonly seek tacit understanding from government officials before taking action, and the officials may privately authorise them to try the innovative solutions locally, especially for the complex issues that also puzzled the government.

However, when the government gives an obscure or silent response, it becomes tricky and open-ended. Such an attitude may signal no objection (tolerating a university's practice), or no approval (ignoring a university's proposal). In several cases, universities treated the state officials' 'ambiguous, silent response' as 'no objection', exploited the vagueness and gaps, and tested the government's tolerance (Pan, 2007, pp. 135-138). University Z, for instance, carried out a new *shiyān* on student admissions policy without receiving the government's clear response. A university executive involved in this trial suggested, 'The government may not like it, but we will keep implementing the policy within our university until we receive a clear objection from the government'.

Meanwhile, to avoid a clear rejection from the state, some universities chose not to publicise or report their small, local *shiyān* to the government. Several interviewees admitted to me that they have broken some rules and quietly implemented local policy innovation on student admissions and funding matters, even though they believed the government would suspend it once it knew about it. An interviewee said:

My university once took a risk, and quietly conducted a local trial in the highly regulated policy area of student admissions, as we knew that the government would not like it. The government later learnt about it and was upset, saying it was against the government rules, so we had to stop it in the forthcoming semester. However, we had already completed the first year's trial, gained benefits and enjoyed the special policy for a period, so 'the risky test' was still worth it.

It is evident that the experimentation strategy, either *shidian* or *shiyān*, has opened up significant opportunities that lead to more autonomy and support, especially for elite players in the sector. A university executive commented:

Some strong players will unavoidably perform better, develop cleverer ideas, sell these ideas more effectively, and hence gain an advantageous position under the 'rules of the game' [policy experimentation] ... If one [university] is better at playing the game, it will get more opportunities and autonomy.

Successful policy experimentation by leading institutions has to a large extent accelerated the development of Chinese higher education policy, despite the isolated, self-interested nature of most cases. Some innovative trials and ideas were imitated by other institutions, and adopted and promoted by the government widely in the sector. Examples include Tsinghua's *Ziqiang* Scheme for targeted-area students, PKU's international student foundation college, USTC's elite youth class, as well as some C9 members' research recruitment standards, research training models and PhD elimination systems, all of which have made broad, long-term impact on the development of the university sector.

Concluding remarks

Over the last several decades, in response to socio-economic changes, the Chinese government has introduced new institutional rules to regulate its operations and policymaking. Its strategy has been described as 'political gradualism': the adjustment of its institutional framework guarantees economic reforms and political stability on one hand, while it accommodates social change on the other; the ultimate goal is to maintain the CPC's authority (Zheng, 2010, p. 43). To a certain extent, China's institutionalisation has made a positive impact on the government's practices, putting increasing formal proceedings and consultations in place. Various earlier studies on economic policymaking have reported that the Chinese system is more institutionalised, and the importance of *guanxi* has changed (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 124; Gold et al., 2002; Guthrie, 1998, 1999; Kennedy, 2008, p. 109; 2009, p. 207; USCBC, 2008).

My investigation on higher education governance, however, suggests that the central institutionalisation has been imperfect and problematic. Informal, personal practices remain influential and widespread in government organisations and policy processes, at least in so far as the high education sector as concerned. Different from businesses and many other sectors, universities operate in an environment where resources have been increasing rather than reducing and where the role of the government has remained central. The capacity of universities to adapt and prosper in such a complex bureaucratic setting largely depends on their accumulation and deployment of three specific forms of social and cultural capital. These are the most salient aspects of the universities' toolkit: mobilising human factors, scientific persuasion and policy experimentation.

The leading Chinese research national universities are a repository of social, cultural and political influence, and scientific knowledge. They also serve a central role in the national development strategy. These forms of capital provide them with a great capacity, competitive advantage, and leverage in the governmental process, and enable them to effectively exploit the fissures in this system. In contrast, the smaller, non-elite institutions have limited connections and resources to utilise these lobbying strategies and exploit this semi-institutionalised system. They have become disadvantaged in the lobbying game and competition in the higher education sector.

The importance of *guanxi*

Has the important role of *guanxi* changed in university–government interactions? In studying the lobbying of Chinese business, Kennedy and Deng suggest that with China’s institutionalisation, the importance of *guanxi* in business–government relationships has transformed. They outline that *guanxi*-based interventions are more commonly the purview of local governments where firms need approval for their individual business, in which case the backing of a single or just a few officials can make all the difference; at the national level, where laws go through a complex evaluation process by many offices, *guanxi* serves more to help companies gain face time with officials than to guarantee a decision will go in their favour; companies need to rely more on the information they provide and the strategies by which they convey their message; and hiring former officials is common among companies and associations, but such staffers are more valued for their knowledge of the inner workings of the political system than their relationships with specific individuals in office (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 124; Kennedy, 2009, p. 207). These observations clearly do not fit the university–government interactions I illustrated in this chapter.

Guanxi remains critical and central in university–government interactions. Universities rely on *guanxi* for all nation-level policies, big or small, regardless of the complexity of the evaluation process and the number of offices involved. It is true that compared to major national policies, *guanxi* plays a more expedient and explicit role in influencing the decisions on small and medium-scale policies, where less process and fewer officials are involved. However, *guanxi* remains powerful in shaping the process and decisions on large national policies. It helps universities gain face-to-face time with officials, to seek intelligence and convey their advocacy; it also helps universities secure a decision that will go in their favour. For instance, *guanxi* can manipulate and alter the compositions and verdicts of expert evaluation panels, overwrite substantial policy deliberations, disclose confidential information, and twist or intervene formal procedural rules. Especially, *guanxi* with senior government officials can fast-

track and cut through a complex bureaucratic process, result in immediate decisions and actions, and overturn previously made decisions by multiple offices.

Universities do attempt to build their cases and influence policy decisions through persuasion, such as shaping officials' personal views by strengthening their public standing and providing information and rhetoric. Yet, they seem to value more, and put more efforts and planning into, developing close ties with officials and mobilising human factors. They cultivate and deepen bonds with former and current officials through work and private activities, and transform them to personal *guanxi*; they hire people with official links, posts and influence to foster personal ties; they take advantage of the two-way personnel mobility system and strengthen their alumni connections to develop *guanxi* networks with the officialdom.

There is no doubt that scientific persuasion and policy experimentation are important lobbying strategies, but they do not decrease or contest *guanxi* in university–government interactions. Rather, they often support and enhance the important role of *guanxi*. For some, scientific persuasion and policy experimentation are the icing on the cake. For example, it is not rare for universities to employ these means to help legitimatise and justify the officials' *guanxi*-based choices and personal discretions. Officials need to respond to the constant pressure and demands on accountability and transparency from other universities and society at large, despite their lack of a genuine desire to pursue objectivity and formality in the process. As my interviewees (including government officials) suggested, even for major public policy issues, if the universities on all sides of the issue have excellent scientific persuasion and/or policy experimentation proposals, 'which one has the strongest and broadest *guanxi*' would be the determining factor for the final outcome and decision. Such a common view lends weight to my theory.

Evidently, the *guanxi*-based university academic culture has a significant impact on China's higher education system and its development. For instance, Rui Yang argues that under the influence of a corrupt academic culture in China, *guanxi* restrict free movement of staff, students and resources. Decision making is not based on academic merit, but personal relationships and preferential treatment. Misconduct is common in daily academic and administrative affairs. Chinese scholars increasingly pursue administrative standing, rather than devoting their time to academic research (R. Yang, 2015, pp. 532-533; 2016). The toxic Chinese academic culture impedes meritocratic values, free inquiry, fair competition, which may create key structural problems and hinder Chinese universities' further improvement in the international rankings (Altbach, 2016; R. Yang, 2015, pp. 531-533; 2016).

The impact of university lobbying on the system

China's political and regulatory environment has clearly shaped universities' lobbying strategies and practices significantly. But how does university lobbying in turn impact on the government system and its policymaking?

First, the universities' mobilisation of human factors promotes covert and self-interested transactions, deepens the informality and personal practices, and hinders the transparency and fairness of the government processes and in the sector.

Second, due to the lack of formal institutions and channels in the system for bottom-up initiatives and policy advocacy, universities resort to other formal and informal paths to intervene in government processes, such as exploiting their policy advisory role to advocate policy. When the two roles of policy advisor and policy advocate overlap, integrity is compromised, and conflicts of interest and unethical conducts arise. In many cases, policy expert committee members were subject to nepotism, seeking special interests for their own institutions and colleagues.

Third, despite their self-interested nature and motives, universities' tactful personal communications, constant scientific persuasion, and innovative ideas not only can stir officials' minds to address their short-term and local issues, but also may gradually change government official's attitude towards policymaking in the long run. As a critical source of knowledge, innovation and expertise, universities offer intellectual support, educate officials on all aspects of policies, and encourage open-mindedness and creativeness. Incrementally, this may facilitate a more inclusive and rational approach and consultative culture in the bureaucracy, increasing officials' appetite for universities' input on the development of new policies. This may gradually transform the way that policy is produced.

Fourth, the universities have shown a remarkable ability to respond to contingent circumstances, adjust strategies based on the matters and people involved, and influence individual decisions and outcomes. By shaping individual policies and experimentation in the 'contention zone', universities are able to bring forth changes and improvements, soften tough restrictions, and push the policy boundaries, gradually transforming the higher education regulatory environment. As an interviewee suggested, policy trials 'opened the door' to a greater flexibility and incremental reform for the future. Once the thinking of the government has some 'inertia', it may lead to a long-term transformation.

Chapter 6—Discussion and conclusion: lobbying authoritarianism and the practices of elite universities

This thesis draws a picture of the contemporary lobbying practices of elite universities in China, which has been so far elusive, opaque and underexplored. In its five chapters, I have investigated how Chinese research universities interact with a complex government machine to influence policymaking and advance particularistic or collective interests. By gaining a deeper understanding of their strategies and practices under various conditions, my goal was to identify the key factors that shape universities' lobbying behaviour, as well as to assess to what extent they are able to successfully influence decisions of the authoritarian state, the limitations of such influence, and the potential implications of their activism for the current political structure.

Constraints amid opportunities: where lobbying begins

For elite Chinese research universities, lobbying has become a prevalent practice and perhaps the most significant part of university–government interactions. Both opportunities and constraints have contributed to such a development.

Over the last several decades, with the goal of building a strong nation, the government has injected massive investments into education and science, and assigned a strategic national and global role to research universities in driving China's global competitiveness (Chapter 1). Facing these significant economic opportunities and resources, research universities have not only successfully strengthened their growth, capabilities, status and internationalisation, but also developed their ambitions and their consciousness of long-term values and missions and of the scholarly nature of their work, which they also see as crucial to their upswing in global rankings (Chapter 2).

These elite universities perceive themselves as distinctive and influential social, moral and political organisations that act in the public interest. They strive to pursue social missions, advance knowledge and fulfil national responsibilities for socio-economic development. Meanwhile, the government's increasing need for scientific expertise to support more rational policymaking has also provided new opportunities for universities to participate in the policy processes as expert advisors. This is especially true of a small number of elite research institutions which have demonstrated a growing involvement in the government's policy consultations.

Nevertheless, these opportunities and developments are accompanied by numerous constraints (Chapter 2). Chinese national research universities remain financially dependent on the state and are increasingly vulnerable and sensitive to the volatility of government funding. On one hand, they have to attract and secure the government's commitment to funding national higher education appropriately; on the other, they compete fiercely with peer institutions for finite resources to fulfil their own development plans, often resorting to manipulation and back channels to influence the funding distribution, largely decided by specific government divisions and individual officials.

Government funding comes with strings attached. It guides and confines universities to deliver on the government's specific nation-building priorities and meet its short-term plans. The state's structural and regulatory constraints, ranging from the central accreditation of academic degrees, to student recruitment, to government audits of academic programs, to the restricted use of government funds, have also significantly hindered their academic and operational activities. In light of their rapid growth and internationalisation, all these policy restraints undermine universities' development and long-term missions, and their credibility as scholarly organisations.

Universities envisage that to fulfil their roles and advance their values, they need a supportive policy environment that provides both autonomous operational space and sustainable funding resources, which guarantees them proper rights and entitlements, allows them to decide on their academic activities and institutional priorities, and supports their endeavours in areas that may rely on long-term investment rather than short-term priorities. To achieve this result, universities require proactive engagement with the government and deeper involvement in policy processes.

However, despite a trend towards procedural and scientific attitudes, education policymaking remains inefficient and dysfunctional (Chapter 1): formal channels of policy communications are typically top-down and led by the government; and there is a lack of legitimate spaces and formal institutions through which universities can act as policy advocates and lobbyists. This contradiction reflects to a large extent a dilemma for the government: it wants to appear more consultative on public policy, but it also fears the political consequences of consultation (Kennedy, 2009, p. 213) and has 'an aversion to bottom-up initiatives' (Zheng, 2010, p. 143).

So for universities, intervening in the governmental processes through an array of informal lobbying activities and by exploiting their role as policy advisors has become imperative to advocate agendas and shape decisions.

Strategies and flexibility amid rigidity: the practices of university lobbying

Central to their actions is the universities' understanding of the key policy constraints and how much autonomy they can seek in the current policy framework. I have identified three 'policy zones' characterised by different levels of autonomy (Chapter 2).

In a non-negotiable 'no-go zone' (issues where the power of the government is unchallengeable, for instance, party leadership and central appointment and removal of university leaders), universities bury their scepticism, avoid any forms of challenge or contest, and comply with (or even take advantage of) the rules to pursue their interests. In the localised, low-risk 'autonomous zone' (issues that universities can manage with reasonable autonomy, such as local research training), universities become increasingly innovative, and may even challenge government policies.

Nevertheless, it is in the 'contention zone' (academic and operational issues that are centrally controlled, including student admissions, the allocation and use of government funding, and academic programs and degrees) that leading research universities feel their survival, priorities and long-term undertakings are most threatened. Universities are motivated and willing to seek solutions and pursue their rights and competitive advantages by undertaking certain risks and cautiously contesting and negotiating these policies by the state.

It also becomes apparent that the rules that apply in each 'policy zone' are a consequence of the nature of the ideology and legitimacy of the political system. Certain issues have allowed for more autonomy and universities' intervention than others, depending on the presumed levels of risk of political and social instability. This seems to resonate with what both Mertha and Balla have suggested: the state accepts public participation in the policy areas where no high-stakes confrontations are posed, and when neither democratisation nor legitimacy is an immediate, salient concern (Balla, 2012, pp. 656-657; Mertha, 2008, p. 151).

Leaders of elite universities have developed strategies that adapt to policies in the different zones, and their interactions with the government and choices of strategy are shaped by a clear perception of what is allowed and what is not, as well as by the level of urgency or issues at stake.

The perception of risks affects not only their strategies but also their organisational forms of action, in particular, whether and how universities act individually or in a coordinated fashion vis-à-vis state actors. The significant lobby group the C9 (Chapter 3) sheds light on how collective lobbying works in the university sector and on the limitations it faces in the Chinese context.

The state's suspicion, the lack of formalisation and leadership within the group, decreasing urgency for policy collaboration, together with the members' competition and dependence on the state, have all contributed over time to the weakening of the C9 group and its lobbying activities. However, if we look deeply, the powerful overarching political environment is the most salient factor that drives the decline and retreat of the C9 coalition.

In many other countries, such as the US, the UK and Australia, it is common for similar universities to align interests and formalise coalitions despite their fierce competition, conflicts of interest and dependence on government funding. For example, in Australia, the vice-chancellors of eight leading research universities established a group called 'Group of Eight (Go8)', which was self-initiated in 1995 and formally incorporated in 1999 with its permanent secretariat based in Canberra (Go8, 2015). The eight members have been long-term rivals in nearly every area, including government funding, student recruitment, and academic performance and international rankings. Despite their different, conflicting views on some policy matters, their pursuit of self-interests, as well as their heavy reliance on the government funding, the leaders of the eight member universities convene regular meetings (five times a year) to discuss common issues and sustain a solid, active lobby alliance with a strong public profile. Their formal grouping has maximised the potential for collaboration in a competitive environment, adding value for member universities through jointly influencing public policy, financing and regulation of higher education and university research in Australia (Go8, 2015, 2016a, 2016b).

However, in China, the significant difference is the political system that inhibits and punishes the formalisation of advocacy coalitions. In this system, the alignment of interests around collective organisations in the university sector is subject to political restrictions and scrutiny. This is similar to the political restrictions and central control over social groups and advocacy organisations in other sectors of China (Cheng, 2006, pp. 47-48; Kennedy, 2009, pp. 213-214; Unger & Chan, 2008, pp. 66-68). Furthermore, the state controls universities by controlling the universities' leaders and their careers. University leaders need to act discreetly for the interests of their university and themselves. It is in general difficult for universities, even the most powerful ones, to form coalitions and produce change jointly. 'Collective action' remains controversial as a *modus operandi* for universities.

The C9's significant experience and influence may appear to some as suggesting a structural change in government–university relations. Yet, the C9 members' swift return to the normality of individual action and the MoE's tightening grip over universities to maintain order in the sector (despite initial support for the creation of the C9 when the interests of the universities and ministry were aligned) have shown the continuing difficulties of open and collective

lobbying efforts. It is still possible that university actors may seize or produce another significant opportunity and align their interests on specific issues, but the lobbying experience of the C9 casts a pessimistic shadow on the possibility of this becoming the 'new normal'.¹⁴⁴

The prevalent practices of university lobbying remain fragmented, self-focused and issue-based. Direct lobbying by universities remains the main course of action over a broad range of issues, including on important matters of collective interest which would suggest a cooperative and joint approach. For instance, the lifting of excessive restrictions on university student admissions, an increase of the government's average education expenditure for each student, or reductions to the central control and audits of academic programs and degrees should be issues that unite universities but in practice fail to elicit a collective reaction. Why?

As mentioned earlier, interest alignment and joint action are rare in the university sector largely because the state is wary of a collective voice and restricts united policy initiatives that may lead to threats to its political authority or greater social activism. The opportunity cost of collective actions is potentially very high. This situation is also due to conflicting priorities, divided focus and serious competition amongst universities. The fear of government reprisals seems predominant, because university leaders have made serious attempts to lobby collectively on some policy issues but have had to pull back due to concerns about the political sensitivity of the issues they were addressing and the potential consequences of doing so.

Interestingly, although formal coalitions remain impractical, universities have developed an alternative solution to pull resources together. My evidence indicates that they at times purposely 'coordinate' lobbying efforts by acting simultaneously but separately on important matters of common interest and consensus. This may mean talking to the same office at a similar time on the same issue with the same goal, rather than taking a concrete, joint action. Such a strategy reduces 'political risks' and circumvents the political constraints against formal organisations that represent aligned interests vis-à-vis the state. Although it may help achieve their goals, such a form of 'coordinated' lobbying is weak and unlikely to evolve into powerful formal alliances. It again highlights that despite their various strategies and activities, universities still remain cautious not to push certain sensitive buttons of the government and mostly act within the perceived rules and pre-defined political boundaries.

Such a discreet and restrained approach is also displayed in universities' non-confrontational language and subservient tone during lobbying, and in how they desensitise and legitimise lobbying practices through adopting less-threatening expressions of intra-institutional

¹⁴⁴ The development of C9 may require continuous monitoring in future research.

communication and highlighting their reverence to the state and the potential win-win outcomes (Chapters 4 and 5).

Youshui, the Chinese word for ‘lobbying’, remains politically and socially sensitive and bears negative connotations that often inhibit the formalisation of its practices (Cheng, 2006; Cheng et al., 2003; S. He, 2009), despite lobbying being a de facto reality informally accommodated by the state. On one side, the government needs input and feedback from universities, and is subject to influence; on the other, it does not wish to be subject to influence or to appear vulnerable. Consequently, university executives whose careers are directly controlled by the state generally adopt a more covert, cautious and low-key approach when dealing with officials, adjust their language and camouflage their intentions accordingly. They hardly ever label their lobbying behaviour as ‘an attempt to influence the government’. They tend to use more familiar, neutral expressions to policy practitioners instead, such as ‘bottom-up reporting’ and ‘providing policy feedback’, as these suggest acceptable bureaucratic practices and legitimise interactions.

In a fragmented, hierarchical and opaque political environment, universities’ capacity to successfully produce opportunities and exercise influence often largely depends on how well they understand the system and are able to exploit its fissures and circumvent its rules. Universities carefully track policy trends and are keen observers of any changes in the balance of powers to identify and seize opportunities in the system.

Fragmentation, rivalry and hierarchy amongst central organs, and the supreme power of the top leaders are some of the most important features of the central bureaucracy that universities try to use to their advantage. Based on their knowledge and intelligence, they are able to identify the crucial central decision-makers (various state actors) within the system and adjust their strategies accordingly. For instance, they access the top leadership to cut through the limitation of the bureaucratic structure and receive policy shortcuts due to the supreme power of the national leaders (as shown by the cases of PKU and Tsinghua in Chapters 3 and 4 and Universities D and M in Chapter 5). They also go over the head of their supervisory MoE and influence other central bodies to improve the standing of education or help the MoE overcome its weakness in the power hierarchy (see examples of SJTU and Tsinghua in Chapter 4).

In addition, the capacity of universities to adapt and prosper in such a complex bureaucratic setting also depends on their accumulation and deployment of three specific forms of social and cultural capital (Chapter 5). These are the most significant aspects of the universities’ toolkit and tactics: mobilising human factors (e.g., personal connections, alumni networks and intelligence gathering), rational persuasion through knowledge (e.g., presenting evidence and

third-party endorsement), and involvement in local policy experimentation (e.g., policy innovation to force a new policy and leading by example (Heilmann, 2008, pp. 2-4, 29-30) namely *shidian* and *shiyān*).¹⁴⁵

The idea promoted by some scholars that the system is becoming more institutionalised and the importance of *guanxi* is changing in direct government–business interactions (Deng & Kennedy, 2010, p. 124; Gold et al., 2002; Guthrie, 1998, 1999; Kennedy, 2008, p. 109; 2009, p. 207; USCBC, 2008) is challenged by the enduring centrality of personal and informal factors in the higher education sector, and the persistent importance of *guanxi* in university–government interactions.¹⁴⁶

The universities rely on *guanxi* for all nation-level policies, big or small, regardless of the complexity of the evaluation process and the number of offices involved. It helps universities gain face time with officials, seek intelligence and convey their advocacy; it also helps universities secure a decision that will go in their favour.

As a result, the universities highly value *guanxi*, and put a lot of effort and planning into developing close ties with officials and into mobilising human factors. They cultivate personal *guanxi* through professional connections; they hire people with official links and posts; they take advantage of the two-way personnel mobility system, and strengthen their alumni ties to advance political influence.

As a repository of social and political influence, personal connections, and scientific knowledge and innovation, national research universities utilise and combine their social, cultural and intellectual assets, and adjust their lobbying strategies according to contingent circumstances, issues or the people involved. These resources, together with their position in the national developmental strategy, seem to provide universities with significant influence and leverage vis-à-vis the government.

The rules of the game: key factors shaping lobbying practices

The above lobbying experiences have demonstrated how universities tactfully choose what language to use, and decide strategically on what matters and officials to influence, what form

¹⁴⁵ Description about *shidian* (试点) and *shiyān* (试验) has been provided in Chapter 5. Also see Glossary of Chinese terms.

¹⁴⁶ In Footnote 24 (see Introduction), I have provided a summary of these scholars' discussions on *guanxi*. Their observations clearly do not fit the central policy process and university–government interactions I illustrated in Chapter 5. Informal, personal practices remain influential and widespread in the government organisations and policy processes. *Guanxi* remains critical and central in university–government interactions.

their agency should take, how they overcome difficulties within the perceived rules, as well as what social and cultural capital they deploy.

Importantly, they have also revealed how much universities' lobbying strategies, behaviour and even outcomes depend on two salient factors that define the 'rules of game' framing the interactions between universities and the state. They are: the need and capacity to monitor, navigate and penetrate an opaque central power structure within the state bureaucracy and the normative and regulatory environment of the higher education sector; and the contingencies that create strategic opportunities and/or major crises. When the central power structure and regulatory environment are rigid, taking advantage of or reacting to the contingencies becomes necessary for any effective action.

As I elaborated earlier, fragmentation, rivalry, formal and informal hierarchies, as well as informality and human factors prevail amongst all levels of officials and throughout the central organs and their sub-divisions. The complex central environment and the constantly changing balance of power require active monitoring by universities. The universities continuously mobilise their contacts within the bureaucracy to keep their intelligence up to date, devote a great deal of resources to cultivating *guanxi* with power brokers and decision-makers, and often depend on personal relationships and informal interactions to penetrate the system and achieve their objectives.

For instance, the central power structure maps the 'internal politics' and mechanics within the bureaucracy and decides which central units or individuals control significant resources and discretionary powers. The universities' understanding of this structure determines their lobbying target(s) for specific policy agendas (from special funding to project approvals), and shapes their tactics in dealing with various central players and in exploiting the fissures within the system.

In cases described in Chapter 4, Universities C and H interacted with multiple agencies simultaneously to maximise resources and policy support by taking advantage of the divisions and rivalry between the state actors. Moreover, when the universities face 'dead-end situations', they take advantage of their private access to national leaders to overrule lower-level decisions, or obtain shortcuts and special exemptions. In addition, the universities generally place greater lobbying efforts on influential organs in the power structure that are well placed to allocate resources, such as National Development Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST), and the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS). Besides, when changes in the central power structure take place, universities are capable of reacting quickly. For example, when the MoE started to become a stronger player and obtained greater financial independence, universities increased their lobbying of the MoE;

once they discovered that a low-profile branch of the MoE was going to lead several new well-funded university science education programs that involved billions of yuan, the universities quickly deployed resources and vigorously networked with its officials for a slice of the cake. Monitoring the quicksand of a multi-dimensional central government environment is critical for universities' success.

Contingencies also create lobbying opportunities and shape universities' decisions and actions on specific issues. For instance, universities seized opportunities on the occasions of important events (e.g., the centenary celebrations at PKU in 1998 that originated Project 985 and at Tsinghua in 2011 that initiated the 2011 Scheme) and special occasions (e.g., private meeting sessions with national leaders and ministers, and senior officials' visits to campus) to advance proposals to key decision-makers who are attending. When the MoE planned a new pilot policy trial (*shidian*) on student admissions at selected institutions, universities took advantage of the 'open window' to propose new ideas and plead for participation so that they could obtain greater autonomy and legitimately break with rules in that policy area.

In addition, the occurrence of major incidents or political transitions, such as urgent threats to funding streams, changes in key decision-makers, and the government's new priorities or directives, often makes universities react with enthusiasm or desperation, behave more decisively and promptly, and even become willing to take certain risks.

For instance, as I illustrated in Chapter 3, when a newly arrived national leader suddenly posed a threat to the university funding policy Project 985 promised by the previous government, C9 universities had to act proactively by all means (e.g., engaging national media, hosting high-profile conferences, and submitting special reports) to change his mind and protect their positions and interests. As part of these desperate efforts, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (SJTU), one of the C9 members, unveiled the 'Academic Ranking of World Universities' (ARWU) at their joint meeting in 2003, aiming to show the disadvantaged positions of Chinese universities in the global index and lobby the government for continued funding support for Project 985 universities to catch up with the rest of the world. Notably, C9 members maximised their collective lobbying efforts and influence every time they faced possible Project 985 funding cuts, but pulled back quickly when a crisis eased. Besides, as shown in Chapters 3–5, PKU and Tsinghua compete fiercely with each other but often had to put their conflicts aside and lobby the state collaboratively (e.g., signing joint petition letters) when critical urgent matters were at stake that would affect them both badly.

These two key factors not only reveal specific patterns and a set of 'rules of the game' for university–government interactions, but also suggest that the political and regulatory characteristics of the Chinese political system do impact on the choices of Chinese universities.

Essentially, universities' lobbying is both enabled and restrained by this situation. While the complexity and cracks of the system allow the most resourceful universities to operate beyond their institutional remit, exploit opportunities, and obtain competitive advantages, these universities are also largely restrained and framed by the system—they have to adjust themselves to fit into the system and apply suitable strategies in order to make their plans work.

Interestingly, the lobbying practices of Chinese elite research universities to a certain degree resemble the tactics of businesses, NGOs, and even individual rightful resisters and collective social movements, although they operate in different contexts and pursue varied goals. For example, businesses generally adopt non-confrontational approaches to avoid challenging the government's authority: deference to the state and aiming at potential win-win outcomes is the most common strategy; and they mainly interact directly with the state on policy without relying on trade associations (Kennedy, 2008, p. 164). Many NGOs, media and individual activists have shaped policy decisions by exploiting the cracks within the fragmented government and building alliances with like-minded officials (Mertha, 2008, pp. 151, 157-158; Zheng, 2010, p. 130). The university sector is not an outlier.

Furthermore, this also reminds me of the ordinary citizens involved in rightful resistance and protests:¹⁴⁷ they commonly work near the border of authorised channels and official norms to address issues;¹⁴⁸ employ the rhetoric, commitments and directives of the powerful and use

¹⁴⁷ In reform-era China, ordinary citizens, such as migrants, workers, farmers and pensioners, have made rights claims in various forms to address their political contentions and conflicts with authorities, which spurred unrest and disruptive activities such as petitions, protests, demonstrations, and riots (Saich, 2004, pp. 203-206). For instance, pensioners claim the 'sacred right not to have to labour' (Hurst & O'Brien, 2002, p. 351); migrant workers claim the right to organise unions (F. Chen, 2007, pp. 67-69); and farmers assert a right to elect village leaders (O'Brien, 2001, pp. 407-435). According to O'Brien and Li, the main common attributes of vibrant, popular rightful resistance by these individuals include: 'operating near the boundary of authorised channels, employing the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinging on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relying on mobilising support from the community' (O'Brien, 2013, pp. 1051-1052; O'Brien & Li, 2006, p. 2).

¹⁴⁸ Due to the lack of formal institutions for bottom-up initiatives as earlier mentioned, universities explore alternative, nonstandard forms and opportunistic paths to intervene policymaking and influence decisions. For instance, they submit special petitions and jointly signed letters directly to the government leaders; they quietly 'coordinate' lobbying in an environment that restricts collective actions; they play an informal policy advocacy role with a hidden agenda while serving as formal policy advisors in the governmental process; they gather confidential intelligence on funding and awards, and manipulate formal governmental procedures through covert, private interactions; they bend existing rules (such as restrictions over the spending of funds) in a way that is near the margin of 'legality'; and in particular, they experiment with new rules without telling the government or before receiving its permission in order to test the tolerance of the state and push the policy boundaries.

persuasive normative language to legitimise and frame their claims;¹⁴⁹ rely on locating and exploiting the fragmentation and divisions within the state; and mobilise support from allies (O'Brien, 2013, pp. 1051-1052; O'Brien & Li, 2006, p. 2).¹⁵⁰ These patterns can also be largely used to describe university contention and activism with the obvious caveat that universities mobilise different types of allies (e.g., alumni within the officialdom and international partners versus local communities) and operate in a very different context.

The unexpected shared attributes between these practices and actions, including the more disguised, discreet attempts behind the public scene and the more open, vibrant resistance in public view, or high within the system and low at the bottom of society, may suggest that interactions with the government in China by diverse actors with various motives are regulated by a similar set of written and unwritten rules that explain and frame the attempts, behaviour and strategies to negotiate and influence authoritarianism.

Lobbying authoritarianism: limitations, influence and implications

So how should we understand universities' claims, tactics and patterns of interaction with the authoritarian state, their extent of influence on government decisions, as well as their limitations and potential to make structural modifications to the current system? Is their activism strategic and contingent? Or can it lead to long-term, structural change to the existing institutions of the system?

Universities are a unique type of agent: being repositories of knowledge, they are significant and influential organisations with a special set of social, cultural, economic and political attributes and functions; they are operated by highly skilled academics and professionals; they

¹⁴⁹ To attract sustainable funding to the sector, expand institutional autonomy, or secure approval of special proposals, universities often deploy national leaders' established plans, commitments, principles and slogans as rhetoric to legitimise their claims and remind officials of the top-level commands and their due obligations. They include language such as 'delivering the national 12th Five-year Plan', 'building a knowledge economy', 'revitalising Western China' and 'developing world-class universities'. C9 universities, for example, often used Deng's slogan 'concentrating energy on the targeted areas (key stakeholders) to accomplish large undertakings' (*jizhong liliang ban dashi* 集中力量办大事) to argue for privileged, prioritised funding and greater autonomy to be given to a small number of elite institutions.

¹⁵⁰ Unlike farmers and workers who typically organise and assemble community, universities rely on mobilising support and assistance from different types of allies, such as international partners and experts. Universities devote particular attention and extensive efforts to building alliances with congenial officials and deploy connected personnel within the officialdom to seek intelligence, gain assistance, access powers and decision shortcuts. It is worth noting that despite their root in the community and significant social support bases, Chinese universities mostly avoid involving community members such as students and parents during their activities and interactions with the government, largely due to strict political constraints and possible negative consequences.

are not only embedded in the political system and led by government-appointed executives, but also deeply rooted in Chinese society as providers of highly sought-after education and skills, and increasingly inserting themselves in the global imaginary about research and education. As a result, they have developed mixed perceptions of their identity, roles and rightful claims: one defined and driven by their academic work, the public interest of education, and international partnerships; the other shaped and framed by their organic relationship with the government, on which they remain dependent. Their actions are guided both by righteous motives and sincere belief, and by a rule-based mentality and strategic calculations.

Universities have developed a consciousness of their roles, rights and duties such that their lobbying of the state is framed by their position in a modern society. As operators and members of a community of higher learning, they perceive their activities, including knowledge exploration, promotion of education, and the advancement and application of technology, as the provision of public goods, in the service of the public interest, and as long-term contributions to society. University leaders, despite being appointed by the government, generally maintain principled views of the rights and moral entitlements of modern research institutions, empowered by sufficient institutional autonomy and abundant public funding. Universities' rights awareness, expectations and claims become more intense as they engage in significant internationalisation and witness the autonomy and rights enjoyed by their foreign peers, partners and competitors. In this situation, universities often explicitly express their deep concerns, frustration, disappointment and scepticism at the government and central leaders, as rule-makers place their own interests and priorities over those of universities and education, and rule-enforcement authorities and individuals also often abuse rules. Participating in policymaking is therefore also a way for universities to protect and strengthen their core interests.

On the other hand, this consciousness of a rightful position has developed in the cultural and political context of the authoritarian state and does not translate into contestation of the institutional order: universities tend to separate their local affairs and interests from their general feelings about the political system as a whole; and their motivations for pressing institutional and political changes, and their potential capacity to produce institutional innovation in their own right are severely limited by their organic role within the system and by financial dependency. They frame their claims within state-defined roles and state-endowed rights, which is not only part of their strategic rhetoric and persuasion to legitimise their entitlements, but also reflects the national and international roles that the government has defined and assigned to them. They also act upon their claims within the bureaucratic

structure and play by the existing written and unwritten 'rules of the game' to their own advantage. For example, instead of attempting to contest policies in the 'no-go zone' (such as the right to elect their own university presidents), Chinese research universities accept and abide by these 'principles', only to purposely manipulate them to advance their institutional interests and competitive advantages.

Essentially, their development objectives and reformist agenda require the preservation and thriving of their status, the availability of resources and competitive advantages, adherence to values that underpin the provision of public goods, and a more supportive regulatory and funding environment, all of which cannot be achieved without the support of the state.

Universities believe that their capacity depends on a constant adaptation to the central government's bureaucratic system, exploiting the existing loopholes, bending the rules in the system, and negotiating with an authoritarian regime to obtain concessions, not on changing the system (for all its flaws). As Scott Kennedy has observed about the behaviour of businesses, some may believe democratising the regime is in their best interests, but 'those with relatively significant influence under the current political circumstances may not see a need for much further modification' (Kennedy, 2008, p. 180). Even though universities may want to change certain things in the system, they cannot bite the hand that feeds them.

Given the longevity of the regime, the perceived high risks of strategic suicide or failing a challenge, and the political and financial security they have so far obtained, they need to consider how to play safely and exert influence effectively in the resilient and powerful system without risking too much of their existing advantages and interests (which are largely provided by the current system). In such a position, universities' interactions with the state are unlikely to lead, singlehandedly, to any significant structural changes.

Yet one should not overlook what these institutions have achieved so far within such a confined space, and the extent and potential of their influence. Through lobbying, they have pushed policy boundaries and engineered incremental modifications to the system. Despite the political limitations mentioned above, they have shown a remarkable capacity to produce specific opportunities and influence individual governmental decisions, such as loosening up certain regulatory constraints or attracting additional resources to the sector.

C9 universities, for instance, successfully pushed the permitted limits on PhD student admissions policies through coordinated lobbying activities with substantial overall outcomes. Their actions eventually resulted in new rules for all national universities, and an incremental improvement for Chinese students' access to research training and the quality of domestic PhD programs. They also played a significant role in persuading the state's leaders to extend

Project 985 after its initial three years, which prolonged special national investments for the development of Chinese research institutions.

In particular, as I mentioned earlier, C9 member SJTU unveiled a new world academic ranking system, ARWU, in 2003 as a strategic component of their lobbying efforts in persuading the state leaders to extend Project 985 funding for Chinese research universities. As a result, ARWU not only offered C9 universities a compelling, evidence-based lobbying tool at that time, but has also become one of the most influential international rankings in the world, raising the profile of Chinese institutions and producing far-reaching impact on the global university community.

The C9 members have also individually initiated numerous policy proposals and pilots in other areas such as the accreditation of academic degrees, admissions of undergraduate and postgraduate students, talent training models and the authorisation and management of new degree programs. Through lobbying, they have innovated and improved national education practices and expanded institutional and academic autonomy.

Policy boundaries of what is allowed, that were established by the authoritarian state, are continuously and strategically contested and redefined to accommodate new practices, facilitate growth and ease tensions. In the long run, these small steps are able to gradually soften and shrink the area of the 'contention zone', expand the 'autonomous zone', and transform certain elements and conventions in the regulatory space. The result altogether may well be a more open and vibrant education sector.

Yet, one should also recognise that university lobbying is sometimes a zero-sum game. Competition and inequity do exist between the C9 and other universities. Elite institutions in general have much more political access, leverage and resources in policy process than less prestigious institutions; this central system also channels more advantages and opportunities to the former. Consequently, the interests of the latter may not be well presented in the policy debates, hence these non-elite universities tend to lose competitions for education resources. For instance, some policies that C9 universities have collectively lobbied for, such as the concentration of funding on a few top players and privileged student admissions, would advantage themselves but perhaps damage the less prestigious universities. A different study may be needed to probe the ongoing contention between elite and non-elite institutions, compare their lobbying practices, and assess how their relationships and strategies shape China's policymaking and the development of the tertiary education sector.

Formal and informal practices of university lobbying can have a positive, enduring impact on public policies and decisions. Providing a critical concentration of knowledge, innovation and expertise, universities in general are proactive, persuasive and enthusiastic when they offer

policy ideas and intellectual support to the government. Their relentless use of 'scientific persuasion', tactful personal and informal communications, and policy innovations can not only stir the minds of officials to address short-term local issues of self-interests and influence the national policy agenda, but can also gradually change officials' general attitude towards policy and decision-making.

It remains true that many government officials are still not inclined to pursue objective and formal processes, and 'scientific persuasion' often becomes a tool for them to justify and legitimise personal decisions and preferences, especially when they face growing pressure and questions from universities and society at large. However, universities frequently educate officials on the professional and technical aspects of policies, present alternative perspectives and viable options, and encourage officials to become more open-minded and analytical. This may increase officials' appetite, reliance and acceptance of universities' opinions, bottom-up initiatives and inputs, facilitate a more inclusive and rational approach and consultative culture in the bureaucracy, and transform the way policy is produced. Ultimately, this may lead to an evolution of the system and a more open society. Structural changes do not happen in leaps but through small, intermediate steps involving a lot of breaking-in.

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List of abbreviations

AAU	American Association of Universities
ACGS	Association of Chinese Graduate Schools
ACRU	Association of Chinese Research Universities
ARWU	Academic Ranking of World Universities
C9	Consortium of China Nine Research Universities
CAS	Chinese Academy of Sciences
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDGDC	China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center
CLSG	Central Leading Small Group
CNR	China National Radio
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPCCC	Communist Party of China Central Committee
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
CSADGE	Chinese Society of Academic Degrees and Graduate Education
CSC	China Scholarship Council
FA	Fragmented Authoritarianism
Fudan	Fudan University
Go8	Group of Eight Australia
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HIT	Harbin Institute of Technology
KIP	Knowledge Innovation Project
LERU	League of European Research Universities
LSGSTE	Leading Small Group on Science, Technology and Education
MEP	Ministry of Environmental Protection

MIIT	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoST	Ministry of Science and Technology
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NCEDR	National Centre for Education Development Research
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
NGO	Non-government organisation
NJU	Nanjing University
NPC	National People's Congress
NSFC	Natural Science Foundation of China
ODCPCCC	Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PKU	Peking University
R&D	Research and Development
RCSTEP	Research Centre for Science, Technology and Education Policy
S&T	Science and Technology
SDPC	State Development Planning Commission
SJTU	Shanghai Jiao Tong University
SOE	State Owned Enterprise
TEIs	Tertiary Education Institutions
Tsinghua	Tsinghua University
UKPAC	United Kingdom Public Affairs Council
USTC	University of Science and Technology of China
XJTU	Xi'an Jiaotong University
ZJU	Zhejiang University

Glossary of Chinese terms

This glossary provides a general reference of the key Chinese terms I have used repeatedly in this thesis.

<i>Gaokao</i> (高考)	The national university entrance examination system, mandated by the Chinese Ministry of Education
<i>Guanxi</i> (关系)	Relationships and connections
<i>Jiediao</i> (借调)	Secondment of staff
<i>Neican</i> (内参)	An internally circulated newspaper within the Chinese government that is read by high-ranking officials
<i>Shidian</i> (试点)	Government-led experimental points or pilot projects
<i>Shiyan</i> (试验)	Bottom-up policy trials and new experiments
<i>Youshui</i> (游说)	Lobbying

Appendices

Appendix A—Interviews

I interviewed the following people:

- university leaders and executives, including party secretaries, university presidents, vice presidents and provosts;
- key university personnel of various administrative and policy areas, including directors of party and government relations office (*dangzhengban* 党政办), directors for policy and planning, directors of student admissions, directors of teaching affairs, deans of undergraduate studies, international directors, directors of president's office, and deans of graduate studies;
- scholars and researchers on higher education policy and government administration; and
- former and present government officials from various central organs.

At the beginning of the semi-structured interviews, I made it clear to interviewees that my interest was in the university–government interaction on education and research policies and university lobbying practices. I assured them that their names and identifying features would remain protected and anonymous. The anonymity encouraged frank, open discussions.

I then started to ask general questions, such as their perceptions on research universities' roles and autonomy; university–government relations; understanding of the regulatory and bureaucratic system; current higher education policy issues; individual versus collective action in lobbying practices; and their tactics, strategies and experiences to interact with officials and influence the government. I then requested specific examples and stories. My interviewees tended to begin with broad generalisations, but would invariably end up providing detailed examples and explanations of the lobbying process and their interactions with the government for various policy issues.

Appendix B—Internal departments of the MoE

There are a range of departments and divisions within the MoE with which national universities regularly interact for various policies.

The MoE Department of Development and Planning (*fazhan guihua si* 发展规划司) collects and analyses national education data, draws up national university policies and regulations, and supervises universities' implementation of the rules. Especially, it sets up university operational standards and national student recruitment quotas, and has the approval authority for infrastructure management and building construction at the MoE-affiliated universities (*zhishu yuanxiao* 直属院校).

The MoE Department of College Student Affairs (*gaoxiao xuesheng si* 高校学生司) allocates student admissions quota for each university, based on the national recruitment plan that has been confirmed by the MoE Department of Development and Planning. It also manages university entrance examinations, academic credentials and the records of student enrolments.

The MoE Department of Higher Education (*gaodeng jiaoyu si* 高等教育司) formulates and implements higher education policies on education quality. It conducts regular academic assessments and evaluations, teaching and learning reforms, and university curriculum development. In particular, it administers several major education reform programs, including the well-funded 'Midwest higher education revitalisation scheme (2012–2020)' (*zhongxibu gaodeng jiaoyu zhenxing jihua* 中西部高等教育振兴计划), and the 'Undergraduate education quality project' (*benke jiaoyu zhiliang gongcheng xiangmu* 本科教学质量工程项目).

The MoE Department of Postgraduate Education (doubles the Office of the State Council Academic Degrees Committee) (*xuewei guanli yu yanjiusheng jiaoyu si jian guowuyuan xuewei weiyuanhui bangongshi* 学位管理与研究生教育司兼国务院学位委员会办公室) is jointly led by the State Council and the MoE. It manages national academic degrees and postgraduate programs, and implements and coordinates Project 211 and Project 985 in collaboration with the NDRC and MoF.

The MoE Department of Science and Technology (*kexue jishu si* 科学技术司) leads university research development in the fields of natural science and technology. It often coordinates and collaborates with other ministries on key national science and research schemes, such as the MoST and MIIT. It facilitates and organises universities to participate in the national innovation system and undertake key research projects, as well as supervises universities to develop key

laboratories and research centres. It currently manages various special programs (*zhuanxiang* 专项) including the 2011 Scheme.

The MoE Department of Social Sciences (*shehui kexue si* 社会科学司) develops university research in humanities and social sciences. It also controls the political studies and party education at universities, and strengthens the development and leadership of the party committees within universities.

The MoE Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges (*guoji hezuo yu jiaoliu si* 国际合作与交流司) formulates policies on international education programs, including the conferral system and mutual recognition for international academic degrees.

Appendix C—Project 211 universities (112 members)

(MoE, 2010)

Beijing University of Technology, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing Forestry University, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing Normal University, Beijing Sport University, Beihang University (formerly known as Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics), Beijing University of Chemical Technology, Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Central China Normal University, Central Conservatory of Music, Central South University, Central University of Finance and Economics, Chang'an University, China Agricultural University, China Pharmaceutical University, China University of Geosciences (Beijing), China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), China University of Mining and Technology (Beijing), China University of Mining and Technology, China University of Petroleum (Beijing), China University of Petroleum (Huadong), China University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing University, Communication University of China, Dalian Maritime University, Dalian University of Technology, Donghua University, East China Normal University, East China University of Science and Technology, Fourth Military Medical University, Fudan University, Fuzhou University, Anhui University, Guangxi University, Guizhou University, Hainan University, Harbin Engineering University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Hebei University of Technology, Hefei University of Technology, Hohai University, Huazhong Agricultural University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Hunan Normal University, Hunan University, Inner Mongolia University, Jinan University, Jiangnan University, Jilin University, Lanzhou University, Liaoning University, Minzu University of China (formerly known as the Central University for Nationalities), Nanchang University, Nanjing Agricultural University, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing University, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nankai University, Ningxia University, National University of Defense Technology, North China Electric Power University, North China Electric Power University (Baoding), Northeast Agricultural University, Northeast Forestry University, Northeast Normal University, Northeastern University, Northwest A&F University, Northwest University, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Ocean University of China, Peking University, Qinghai University, Renmin University of China, Second Military Medical University, Shaanxi Normal University, Shandong University, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai University, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Shihezi University, Sichuan Agricultural University, Sichuan University, South China Normal University, South China University of Technology, Southeast University, Southwest University, Southwest Jiaotong University, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Sun Yat-sen

University, Soochow University, Taiyuan University of Technology, Tianjin Medical University, Tianjin University, Tibet University, Tongji University, Tsinghua University, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Beijing University of International Business and Economics, University of Science and Technology Beijing, University of Science and Technology of China, Wuhan University, Wuhan University of Technology, Xiamen University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xidian University, Xinjiang University, Yanbian University, Yunnan University, Zhejiang University, Zhengzhou University, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law.

Appendix D—Project 985 universities (39 members)

(MoE, 2011b)

Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Nanjing University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, University of Science and Technology of China, Xi'an Jiao Tong University, Zhejiang University, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing Normal University, Beihang University, Central South University, Minzu University of China, Renmin University of China, China Agricultural University, Chongqing University, Dalian University of Technology, East China Normal University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Hunan University, Jilin University, Lanzhou University, Nankai University, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Northeastern University, Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University, Ocean University of China, Southeast University, Shandong University, Sichuan University, South China University of Technology, Sun Yat-sen University, Tianjin University, Tongji University, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Wuhan University, Xiamen University, National University of Defense Technology.

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