



Intertwining of Academia and Officialdom and University Autonomy: Experience from Tsinghua University in China

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This article is a case study of Tsinghua University, one of China's most influential universities, which has special national significance and strong political ties to the state. Recalling three chapters in the past century of Tsinghua's history, this paper gives an interpretive understanding of how the intertwined relationship between academia and officialdom has acted as a double-edged sword in shaping the University's autonomy. It shows an interesting interplay between the university and the state, revealing the mechanisms of the state's control over the university, and the strategies adopted by the university to gain relative freedom. The article concludes by explaining how, in the context of China, an individual university can contend with the state's power to strive for its own autonomy.

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Introduction

The intertwining of academia and officialdom is often perceived as a threat to university autonomy. In the modern Western university system, the concept of university autonomy emphasizes 'the power of a university or college ... to govern itself without outside controls' (Berdahl *et al.*, 1971, 8). Autonomy, along with academic freedom, is defined as intrinsic to the nature of the university, and a precondition if a university is to best fulfill its role and responsibilities toward society (Thorens, 1993). The intertwining of academia and officialdom, however, implies external political influence being brought to bear on education. A great deal of research has addressed diverse aspects of the relationship between academia and officialdom, including, for example, the use of the educational system as a channel for the socialization and circulation of elites (Young, 1958; Galbraith, 1972; Putnam, 1976; Clark, 1984), the development of school networks by political elites for recruitment purposes



(Wilkinson, 1964; Marceau, 1989; Bodiguel, 1990), the involvement of political forces in the appointment and promotion of professors (de Moor, 1993), and the political alliance between the university leadership and government officials, including alumni in powerful governmental positions (Bain, 2003; Ordorika, 2003).

The impact of the intertwined academia and officialdom relationship on university autonomy has been repeatedly and strongly criticized by scholars. For example, Cai (1986) notes that training scholars for future recruitment into government positions could turn a university into a political tool, and that university autonomy could not be achieved if scholars were to lose their own judgment, accommodate political trends and ideologies, and sacrifice university autonomy in order to pave the way for their future political careers. De Moor (1993) argues that appointment and promotion policies can be used as subtle mechanisms of control without overtly restricting university autonomy and academic freedom, as those who hold power outside the education system may be tempted to influence the appointment and promotion of professors in order to prevent the dispersal of critical thinking that might not be in their interests. Ordorika (2003) states that political alliances between university leadership and government officials may act as informal chains of command from government to university officials, enabling the government to exercise direct influence or control over university affairs, such as the designation of the university president and the university budget.

Despite providing useful perspectives on the impact of political influence on university autonomy, existing researches cannot explain a phenomenon observed at Tsinghua University in China — namely, that the political affiliations between Tsinghua's senior administrators, government officials, and national leaders were an important factor in helping Tsinghua successfully attain some level of university autonomy, even though these affiliations inevitably invited the state's political influence on the university. With specific reference to Tsinghua University and its striving for autonomy, this paper argues that the intertwining of politics and academia is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it puts the university under the state's close supervision; on the other, scholars' holding of government office can help release the university from the constraints of state policies in certain circumstances.

To present the argument, the paper first reviews how the Western value of university autonomy has been translated into Chinese universities, and reshaped by the state–university relation in China. This is followed by an illustration of the relation between Tsinghua University and Chinese government, with specific focus on Tsinghua's national significance, the state's control over the appointment and promotion of Tsinghua presidents, and the close personal relations between university leadership, government officials, and national leaders. Then, three examples are selected to show how the

intertwined relationship between academia and officialdom has been an important factor in helping Tsinghua to strive for some autonomy under specific circumstance. The paper concludes by explaining the impact of the complex, intertwined relationship between the university and the state on university autonomy in the context of Tsinghua.

Western Value of University Autonomy in the Context of China

University autonomy is often defined as one of the core values of the Western university tradition, consisting of the freedom from state interference in the university's internal affairs (Hayhoe and Zhong, 1997). The classic definition of university autonomy suggests a distinct separation between the university and the state, as well as the protection of the university's institutional independence from the state's direct control (Berdahl *et al.*, 1971). In the last decade, many researchers have suggested that the university is no longer a self-determining institute with privileged autonomy, but a part of an economic program serving national interests under the state's control or supervision (Maassen and Van Vught, 1994; Tunnermann, 1996; Green and Hayward, 1997), and that the state is playing an increasingly influential role in making higher education enhance the national competence in global economic competition (Husen, 1994). Moreover, recent trends of diversity, differentiation, internationalization, and regionalization in higher education are becoming important factors and increasingly affect the development of policy for the higher education sector at the institutional, national, and regional levels (Neave, 2000b; Van der Wende, 2001; Yepes, 2006). Neave (2003, 138–140) has noted that social transition has raised the questions that 'to which Community should the university be responsible?', and 'how they [universities] are to serve the world beyond the gates of academe'. Therefore, along with the increasing linkages between higher education and social transition and the changing visions of the university (Neave, 2000a), the issue of university autonomy has re-emerged on the agenda over the last few years (Thorens, 2006), and how economic and political influences limit university autonomy has invited hot discussions (Wolff, 1992; Berdahl, 1993; Thorens, 1993).

The value of university autonomy, based on Western university tradition, is not an appropriate basis for interpreting university–state relations in China. Chinese universities are not separated from the state, but are an integrated part of the national modernization project. Higher education in imperial China linked knowledge transmission with scholars' future office careers (Gao, 1992). The Chinese saying, 'being an official after being an excellent scholar' (*xue er you ze shi*) specifically describes the practice of selecting and promoting scholars to become government officials as the primary function of traditional



Chinese scholarly institutions. During the long feudal period, high-ranking government officials were recruited through imperial examinations. The scholar-officials ruled China and the feudal higher educational system, in turn, were geared toward training government officials. In this sense, as Hayhoe (1996, 10) suggested, '[Traditional Chinese scholarly institutions] had neither autonomy nor academic freedom, and ... there was no institution in Chinese tradition that could be called a university'.

The Western idea of university autonomy was introduced into China in the early 20th century by Chinese scholars, such as Cai Yuanpei, who had studied in Western universities and then served the Chinese government. Cai (1922, 377) states that 'educational administration should be free from party control' and notes that 'the first step in replacing bureaucratic influence upon education is to use scholars to guide administration'. When Cai became the Minister of Education of the Republic of China (ROC, 1911–1948), he drew upon French experience to establish a National Academic Council (*Daxue Yuan*), which replaced the Ministry of Education (MoE), and gave academics the statutory power to govern the entire educational system, independent of the ruling party, the *Kuomintang* (KMT) (Gao, 1992; Qu, 1993). At that time, Chinese scholars engaged in vigorous experimentation at all levels and established the 'university' in terms of the defining values of autonomy and academic freedom (Hayhoe, 1996). However, this experiment ended after 1 year when Cai resigned, having gained neither the KMT's approval nor the government's support. Then national leader Chiang Kai-shek re-established the MoE, and personally took the position of Minister of Education, before later appointing his much-trusted political colleague, Chen Lifu, to this position (Gao, 1991). Since then, the tie between academia and officialdom in Chinese higher education has been tightened by the involvement of ruling party in the governance of the entire domestic education system.

In the founding period of the People's Republic of China, university autonomy was not an issue as the state put 'overriding emphasis' on 'how higher education could be shaped to serve the new socialist economy and polity' (Hayhoe, 1996, 76). Through a series of political movements from the 1950s to the 1970s, the linkage between academia and officialdom was further enhanced, because the Communist Party of China (CPC) had successfully integrated its political organs into university administration on campus, and had the power to appoint officials to university leadership positions. Beginning in 1985, the state began delegating more decision-making power to make the higher education system more responsive to economic development and to improve its overall effectiveness and efficiency (Zhou, 2003). Consequently, the university gained more autonomy over admission standards, curricula, degree examinations, teacher training, appointing and promoting personnel, salary regulations, budget, and international academic exchanges (Law, 1995).

However, the state strengthened its control over the appointment of senior university administrative posts, declaring that universities should be both ‘red’ and ‘expert’ (*hong yu zhuan*) — ‘red’ meaning having a socialist political consciousness, and ‘expert’ meaning possessing academic and technical excellence. To guarantee university’s ‘red’ nature, the state stimulates that political staff should be CPC members; and that recruiting students into the CPC is an important political task given by the CPC to Chinese higher education (Li *et al.*, 1997). Promoting ruling party membership among scholars further reinforced the affiliation between academia and officialdom. In imperial China, at least the *shuyuan* could provide an alternative for scholars who did not wish to pursue official careers, so that they could be exempt from political obligation (Hayhoe, 1996). In socialist China, however, the political tasks of higher education means that all scholars, no matter whether they are seeking future government positions or not, are, without exception, required to perform well enough to earn a ‘red’ image.

The intertwined relationship between academia and officialdom mandates that Chinese higher education does not have a status independent from national politics or state control. In their reflections on the idea of autonomy in Chinese higher education, Hayhoe and Zhong (1997) define the concept of autonomy as self-mastery, which deems that a Chinese university’s autonomy exists in its ability to act upon its own initiatives within the framework of the state’s policy. Within the state’s political and economic agenda, a Chinese university may not be understood as an academic community in the Western sense, but, as Law (1996) suggested, as an agent of the state, because it is not the university, but the state, that ‘defined, interpreted, and limited’ university autonomy (Law, 1996, 390). Within such a context, as discussed later in this paper, whether a university could gain more autonomy than the state initially granted depends on whether the university can affect the state’s educational policy-making. Experience from Tsinghua University shows that the close personal relations between the university leadership and government officials can help to achieve this goal. Before analysing the issue, however, it is important to understand the context of Tsinghua University and its relationship with the government.

Tsinghua University and Chinese Governments

Tsinghua University was named for its campus, which was a formal royal garden of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Tsinghua Garden. A deeper derivation of its name and establishment was affected by both the American and Chinese governments, and their respective considerations regarding the use of higher education for fostering elites to serve their economic and political purposes.



In 1901, the Qing government of China was forced to pay the Boxer Indemnity to the United States as compensation for lives lost in the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. In an attempt to use higher education as a means of expanding American influence into China, in December 1908, the US decided to refund the Indemnity (valued at US\$10,785,286 plus interest) to China, on the condition that the Qing government would use the funds to establish educational institutes and to send students to study in America (US Congress, 1908). The US government saw three advantages to educating Chinese students: to win the international competition for increased influence in China; to train Chinese students to become future business partners of the US; and to train Chinese students to become its future political supporters (Compilation Group of Tsinghua History, 1981, 4). W.W. Rockhill, a US ambassador, predicted that, if Chinese students could receive an American education and then become China's high-ranking government officials, they would be able to facilitate American political, economic, and cultural influence in China (Hunt, 1972). Edmund J. James (1906, 72), Vice-Chancellor of the University of Illinois, wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt: '[t]he nation which succeeds in educating the young Chinese of the present will ... reap the largest possible returns in moral, intellectual, and commercial influence'.

Why then, did the American government not use the Indemnity funds to directly fund schools set up by American missionaries in China? This was because, according to the rules of the Qing government, only graduates from official schools could be promoted to high-ranking government positions. In other words, missionary schools had few ties to the bureaucratic class, so the graduates of missionary schools had little chance of becoming senior governmental officials (Su, 1996). Thus, the US government provided funds for the Chinese government to set up official schools, while at the same time retaining the right, as the provider of funds, to supervise those schools (US Congress, 1908). Sponsoring government schools in China became another means of preparing future Chinese elites who would be friendly to the United States, and expanding American influence over schools by providing financial resources.

From the side of Chinese government, despite seeing the unavoidable American influence on China's educational authority (Liang, 1905; Zhang, 1908), Zhang Zhidong, Minister of Education of the Qing government, decided that sending students abroad to study in American universities could be an expedient way to hasten China's economic modernization. He stipulated, however, that before sending students to America, the school must first reinforce their traditional Chinese culture (with an emphasis on Confucian values), so that they would be able to resist American cultural influence and preserve their own national and cultural identity. Therefore, the Qing government donated Tsinghua Garden as the site for a preparatory school

to train candidates selected to be sent to the United States, in order that they might bring back Western knowledge and to quicken China's economic modernization. As an expression of the state's blessing of and expectations for the school, it was named Tsinghua Imperial College. The college was entrusted with the task of fostering the future leaders of China by equipping students with both Western knowledge and Chinese traditional culture (Tsinghua Imperial College, 1911).

Because of the national significance of Tsinghua, the Chinese government kept it under close supervision by appointing a trusted ally as its president. On 29 April 1911, the TIC had its first day of school, under the governance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and the MoE of the Qing government. However, one month later, the 1911 revolution ended the Qing Dynasty and established the ROC. The Beiyang government took over Tsinghua and placed it under the governance of the MoFA. In this period, the US ambassador represented the American government supervising Tsinghua's administration at both the governmental and institutional levels (Compilation Group of Tsinghua History, 1981). Prior to 1917, the US ambassador followed American academic tradition, allowing Tsinghua to have full autonomy, without government's interference, except to provide the necessary financial subsidies (Su, 1996). However, the full autonomy that the US ambassador granted was limited by Chinese government's policy that it must appoint the Tsinghua president. Between 1911 and 1927, the MoFA appointed 12 of Tsinghua's presidents and acting presidents. All of them were former MoFA officials (Su, 1996). Although the MoFA did not directly intervene in institutional administration, it nonetheless controlled Tsinghua by appointing its president and naming him the top decision maker in the internal administration. The linkage between the Tsinghua president and the MoFA's officials gave Tsinghua an image of bureaucracy (Feng, 1987).

In 1929, the Nationalist government took over Tsinghua from the Beiyang government, renaming it National Tsinghua University, under the governance of the MoE. Like their predecessors at Tsinghua College, the first two presidents of the National Tsinghua University (Luo Jialun and Wu Nanxuan) were directly nominated and appointed by the state, and held governmental office. Unlike their predecessors, they had closer political relations with the ruling party (the KMT), and the national leader, Chiang Kai-shek. Both Luo and Wu were members of the KMT and worked as subordinates and trustful comrades of Chiang before they were appointed, and were given political tasks upon their appointment. Luo had been Chiang Kai-shek's secretary. He was expected to lead everybody in Tsinghua to become loyal comrades of KMT (Bai, 1928). Wu was the Vice-Director of the Central Political School, in which Chiang occupied the principal position. He publicly stated that he would 'seriously implement President's Chiang's command to ... realize the mission



of training personnel for serving the nation and the KMT' (Compilation Group of Tsinghua History, 1981, 94, 103). The national president exercised his political will in appointing Tsinghua's president, so the MoE's choice depended on Chiang, who had an unwritten right to make final decisions. Thus the appointment of a Tsinghua president constituted a political process. The political affiliations among Tsinghua's president, the national leader, and the ruling party were enhanced.

The state's political control invited resistance from Tsinghua faculty and students, however. After 1922, the composition of Tsinghua faculty had changed, as some former graduates returned to teach after finishing their undergraduate and post-graduate studies in the United States. They brought back not only Western learning, but also the idea of university autonomy, which demands the right of 'ruling the university by professors'. They objected to Tsinghua being ruled by a president appointed by the government, rather than by professors (Su, 1996). To change the situation, they followed American practice and set up a Professors' Association and Senate. They defined these two organs as the top decision-making bodies in Tsinghua's internal administration. The Professors' Association and Senate therefore reduced the president's power and increased the professors' rights in institutional administration (National Tsinghua University, 1929). To eliminate the possibility of absolute state control over Tsinghua through the appointment of a government official as the university's highest decision maker, Tsinghua scholars strived for the right to elect the university president, and their struggle composed a remarkable chapter in Tsinghua's history between 1920 and 1931, during which time teachers and students expelled six presidents from Tsinghua (Compilation Group of Tsinghua History, 1981). These presidents were expelled mainly because of their failure to meet Tsinghua scholars' request for university autonomy in terms of professors' right to participate in the institutional policy-making process, and students' right to establish self-governance organizations (Professor Association, 1930, 1931, 104; Compilation Group of Tsinghua History, 1981, 20; Huang, 2000, 184). In these incidents, Tsinghua professors and students repeatedly clashed with the MoE over the criteria for appointing their new university president. The criteria they desired required that future presidents should not hold any membership in any political party, nor should they take any official governmental position; they also should be knowledgeable, noble-minded, capable of pursuing Tsinghua's development, and have a strong academic reputation (Wang, 2001a). In order to reduce conflict, the MoE accepted these criteria, and appointed Mei Yiqi to the presidency of Tsinghua. With teachers and students support, Mei served as president for 17 years (from 1931 to 1948), and formed a culture of governing the university by professors in Tsinghua (Mei, 1946). Although he did not hold government office, Mei had good relations with government officials such as



the Minister of Education, Li Shuhuan (Compilation Group of Tsinghua History, 1981, 106). Moreover, he was nominated for the presidency by Fan Yuanlian, a former Minister of Education, and Li Ji, an official of the MoE (Su, 2000, 65). This suggests that, despite giving Tsinghua the right to elect its university presidents, the state effectively limited this right by retaining the power of appointment and selecting only a person it trusted. The linkage between scholars and government officials was still evident. Mei's leadership won the government's trust, so that it did not intervene in Tsinghua's exercise of governing the university by professors, which was later defined by Tsinghua scholars as a 'tradition of Tsinghua' (Mei, 1946, 108; Compilation Group of Tsinghua History, 1981; Su, 2000). However, this tradition did not carry on after 1949.

In 1949, the Central Committee of the CPC took over the ownership of Tsinghua from the Nationalist government, and became the highest level of state authority in the governance of Tsinghua. The appointment of the Tsinghua president was controlled by the CPC through the MoE. The first president chosen during the socialist period was Jiang Nanxiang, who was appointed based on the approval of Mao Zedong. In his inaugural speech, Jiang declared that his duty was to get rid of the old capitalist tradition from Tsinghua, and to reform Tsinghua to become a new socialist university (Wang, 2001a). In 1978, the power to appoint the president of both Tsinghua and Peking Universities was moved from the MoE to a higher level, the State Council, while the Central Committee of the CPC has the final approval. The ranks of the two universities' presidents were equal to that of the deputy minister of the State Council.

Tsinghua professors attempted to regain the right to elect their president, as a way of protecting Tsinghua's internal policy-making from the appointment of governmental officials to positions of authority within Tsinghua, and asked the state to respect the tradition of Tsinghua. While it did give Tsinghua the right to elect its university presidents and Party secretaries, the state limited the effect of this right by imposing two political requirements. First, only Tsinghua teachers with CPC membership could participate in the nomination and election process. Second, successful candidates must hold Chinese nationality and CPC membership, and have experience in both administrative and political posts. Tsinghua professors had no say regarding these two political limits, which were determined by the socialist nature of universities in China, as explained by a senior administrator of the Party Committee of Tsinghua. As a result of these negotiations, the State Council appointed, between 1978 and 2002, four presidents to Tsinghua: Liu Da (1978–1983), Gao Jingde (1983–1988), Zhang Xiaowen (1988–1994), and Wang Dazhong (1994–2003) (Li, 2000, 93; Fang and Zhang, 2001b, 371–372). All were Tsinghua graduates, as well as CPC members, held government office during their presidency, and



were given political tasks by the CPC. Moreover, they shared common political duties, that is, to guarantee Tsinghua supported the socialist path and the leadership of the CPC, and upheld state-supported values and culture to oppose capitalist values (Fang and Zhang, 2001a, 103; 2001b, 806–808). As a reward for their good political performance, they all were promoted to higher positions after their presidency (Tsinghua University, 2003, <http://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/chn/xxjs/gdxz.htm>).

Chinese state control over the appointment and promotion of Tsinghua president has given Tsinghua a leading role in Chinese higher education, serving China's economic modernization and politico-cultural identity, which is ironic, given that the establishment of Tsinghua was intended to increase the US government's economic and cultural influence in China (Pan, 2003). Moreover, Tsinghua's initial mandate of fostering the future leaders of China has been realized in the post-Mao period. Tsinghua has become famous for producing many technocratic elites and has created a network of graduates in local and central government positions (Li, 2000). The outstanding positions of Tsinghua graduates in the PRC government were evident in the 16th CPC Party Congress held in 2002. Of nine standing members of the Politburo, four were Tsinghua graduates, including Hu Jintao, who served as the general Party Secretary of the Central Committee of CPC and President of the PRC. Tsinghua graduates have included former and current Ministers of Education, Jiang Nanxiang (1979–1982) and Zhou Ji (2003–present), and Premier Zhu Rongji (1998–2002), and have, in turn, ruled China's educational system. No other university has as many graduates working in government at the national level. Seeing Tsinghua's school network in central government positions, Chinese people describe the PRC state as a 'Tsing [Tsinghua] dynasty' (*da qing wang cao*), and Tsinghua as a channel for the circulation of officials.

Tsinghua's experience explicitly embodies Chinese cultural legacy, in that the government-recruited scholars to become officials, and appointed them to manage higher education, which, in turn, trained the next crop of government officials. The following stories will tell how, despite unavoidable political influence on the university, the political affiliations between the Tsinghua leadership and government officials have been an important factor in helping Tsinghua gain some university autonomy.

University Leadership, Government Officials and Autonomy at Tsinghua

Three examples have been selected to present how the personal relations between the university leadership and governmental officials have helped Tsinghua to gain some autonomy under special circumstances, including

gaining autonomy from foreign control, being exempt from rigid central control, and increasing the university's power of self-determination.

Gaining autonomy from foreign control

The first example goes back to the initial stages of Tsinghua. As the provider of financial resources, the US government was involved in the decision-making regarding Tsinghua's budget and expenditures, through the Committee of Tsinghua Fund (CTF) and the Board of Trustees. On both the CTF and the Board of Trustees, representatives of the US ambassador took up one-third of the seats; other seats were filled by MoFA representatives, but the US ambassador had the unwritten power to make the final decision (Tsinghua Weekly, 1921). The American influence on Tsinghua's administration at both the governmental and institutional levels invited a sense of national humiliation among Tsinghua's Chinese scholars. Tsinghua's faculty complained that this signified Western intervention in China's internal affairs and constituted a foreign invasion of China via education. At the same time, the Chinese government's tolerance of foreign invasion indicated 'a loss of national dignity' (Compilation Group of Tsinghua History, 1981, 16). Restoring national dignity became a rallying cry for getting rid of foreign influence in financial areas and in the governance of Tsinghua.

When President Luo Jialun was appointed by the Nationalist government in 1928, he requested that the Board of Trustees include representatives from Tsinghua College in the CTF, a request the Board rejected (Su, 2000). To get rid of foreign influence on its internal administration, Luo sought help from the state, including national leader Chiang Kai-shek and government officials of the MoE (Feng, 1987; Su, 1996). Luo was familiar with officials in the MoE and had been recommended by Cai Yuanpei to become the president of Tsinghua. He approached the MoE to help remove the MoFA from Tsinghua's administration, something the MoE also had intended to do in order to reduce foreign influence on China's education. After getting MoE support, Luo approached Chiang Kai-shek for approval. Chiang saw Luo as his trusted comrade and completely approved his requests. As a result, between April 30 and June 29 in 1929, the MoE proclaimed the dismissal of the CTF and the Board of Trustees, and permitted Tsinghua faculty to participate in administering the Tsinghua Fund. It also replaced the MoFA in the governance of Tsinghua, which it renamed as National Tsinghua University. The change signified that Tsinghua had formally eliminated its direct authority relations with the MoFA and the US ambassador. The Nationalist government's position as the first Chinese government with international recognition was important in allowing it to officially end the administrative relations between the American government and Tsinghua. Thus, close



relations between the Tsinghua president, the national president, and government officials helped Tsinghua eliminate foreign interference in institutional administration.

Being exempt from rigid central control

The second example recalls the tough times faced by Tsinghua in the early 1950s. In the political area, Tsinghua's strong affiliation with American higher education was one of the most important factors in Mao Zedong's decision to treat Tsinghua as 'a typical case in the educational revolution from the old capitalist system to the new democratic educational system' (Wang, 2001a, 18). Accordingly, the CPC gave Tsinghua a leading role in political movements designed to eliminate capitalist, particularly American, influence on staffs' and students' thoughts, and to make Tsinghua supportive of the CPC's status (Ouyang *et al.*, 1992). In the academic area, Tsinghua lost its competitiveness in Chinese higher education because, as a result of the nationwide reorganization of higher educational institutions, it changed from being a comprehensive university composed of schools of arts, sciences, law, and engineering to being solely an engineering college. Overwhelming political influence on campus and the lack of competitiveness in Chinese higher education became the most important factors considered by President Jian Nanxiang as he sought to increase Tsinghua's political reliability and academic excellence. Jiang stated that training both 'red' and 'expert' personnel was the best way to satisfy the state that Tsinghua was both loyal to the CPC and capable of training 'cadres with technical skills' (Jiang, 1998, 736).

To earn a 'red' image, Jiang, as a 'Marxist educator' approved by the CPC (Institute of History of Tsinghua University, 2001, 324), had to make Tsinghua a good example of political education and promote Tsinghua's experience as exemplary for the domestic higher educational system. Thus, in early 1953, Jiang set up the System of Political Counselors (SPC, *zhengzhi fudaoyuan zhidu*) by selecting political counselors from junior and senior classes who 'were excellent both politically and academically' (Wang, 2001b). The SPC's main tasks were to strengthen political and ideological education among Tsinghua students and to recruit CPC and Communist Youth League (CYL) members from among students. As a result of the SPC, CPC and CYL members among faculty drastically increased from 22 percent in 1952 to 83 percent in 1959. The CPC and CYL members among students increased from 55 percent in 1952 to 84 percent in 1959 (General Office of Tsinghua University, 1959, 97). Thus, the SPC helped increase Tsinghua's perceived political reliability by expanding the number of CPC members. Deng Xiaoping praised Tsinghua's creation of the SPC as a 'good experience' and the MoE promoted it to Chinese higher education (Li *et al.*, 1997).



To be a pioneer of training experts in science and technology, Jiang and his faculty decided to use Western universities as reference point to establish new specializations, such as nuclear energy, that did not exist in other universities, so that no Chinese university could compete with Tsinghua in these areas. However, in an era when nationwide higher education was under the government's central control, individual universities and colleges had very little room to create their own agendas and initiate actions, and the university had no right to make its own decision on establishing specializations and departments. Moreover, China's international relations limited Tsinghua's right to establish academic relations with Western countries, because China had no official relations with Western countries and saw the United States as its primary political enemy.

Despite this, Tsinghua successfully sought relative freedom in establishing specializations and departments, and developing academic exchanges with western universities. Why could Tsinghua break the central government's rigid control and act upon its own agenda? The answer, this study found, relates to President Jiang and his position in the MoE. Compared to his predecessors, Jiang had closer relationships with the government and the ruling party. While president, Jiang was also the Vice-Minister and General Secretary of the MoE, and Minister and General Party Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education. Holding government and Party offices enabled Jiang to participate in government policy-making. He took advantage of his governmental position to approach the Central Committee of the CPC, and wrote to the CPC's Central Committee to establish new subjects in advanced science and technology. He argued that China needed to catch up with Western countries in advanced science and technology, areas that were useful for China's economic development, and that Tsinghua had the capability to help China develop knowledge in these areas. In the letter, he also expressed the need to directly access Western knowledge.

From the perspective of the CPC's Central Committee, it also intended to access Western advanced science and technology for enhancing national defence and economic development. As an author of a book of Tsinghua's history explained, 'China needed advanced science and technology, but could not directly get it from Western countries'. This is because, after 1949, the United States prohibited official economic aid and private investment to the PRC. Moreover, the United States wanted to prevent the CPC from obtaining military equipment and materials from any countries except the former Soviet Union. Therefore, the PRC could not obtain equipment and materials from Western countries. Since most Tsinghua faculty members had received their higher education in American and other Western universities, their relations with those universities could help China access Western knowledge. Therefore, the MoE allowed Tsinghua to re-establish academic exchanges with Western



universities, including those in the United States. The exchanged materials were science and technology journals published by these universities' presses (Fang and Zhang, 2001a, 756); personnel exchanges were not allowed because there were no official relations between China and these Western countries. Then, with reference to Western universities, Tsinghua set up new subjects, including nuclear science, aerospace, electronics, auto-control, radio, computers, etc. The number of departments increased from seven in 1953 to 12 in 1966, while the number of specializations increased from 22 to 40. The courses' teachers, not the central government, determined the teaching materials (Fang and Zhang, 2001a, 102–103).

Thus, Tsinghua's academic affiliation with Western higher education and China's need for advanced Western knowledge, together with President's Jiang's position in the government, helped Tsinghua to gain relative freedom to develop international academic relations and to broaden the university's curriculum structure. Along with these successes, Tsinghua became more advanced in science and technology and developed as a good example of socialist political education in Chinese higher education. In particular, Jiang's position in the central government and his project of producing 'red and expert' personnel paved a way for developing Tsinghua's school network in the government, making Tsinghua a source of political cadres (Li, 2000). As recognized by a senior administrative staff of Tsinghua in the interview, the 'red' and 'expert' images had enabled Tsinghua graduates to gain the trust of the government. This became one of the most important reasons that many Tsinghua graduates from the 1950s and 1960s were later promoted to leadership positions at local and national levels, including Hu Jintao, who was also a Political Counselor at Tsinghua between 1964 and 1968 (Xinhuanet, 2006, http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-01/16/content_240483.htm). In turn, Tsinghua's graduates in high-ranking government positions benefited Tsinghua by giving it special blessing, as the third example shows.

Increasing the university's power of self-determination

The third example, which dates back to the 1980s, is a chapter in Tsinghua's ongoing project of moving from its status as a national top-ranked university to a world-class institution. In response to macro-changes in the domestic economy and challenges from economic globalization, Tsinghua restructured its curriculum to revert from being a specialized engineering university to becoming a comprehensive university emphasizing a broad knowledge base. In the process of establishing new subjects, Tsinghua referenced Western universities as a quick way of approaching world-class status. Responding to the domestic labour market's demand for professionals in economics and management, Tsinghua established the first School of Economics and

Management (SEM) among China's higher educational institutions. When setting up the SEM in 1984, Tsinghua invited Zhu Rongji, who was a Tsinghua graduate and later the Premier of the State Council, to be the Dean of SEM. Moreover, it invited Premier Zhu to provide an inscription for the SEM. In his inscription, Zhu publicly encouraged the SEM to 'bravely borrow experience from all excellent SEM throughout the world', so as to 'reach world-class standard'. To show the national leadership's support, the SEM put Zhu's inscription at the entrance of its academic and administration building. Support from Premier Zhu enabled Tsinghua to play a leading role in developing joint programs with foreign universities. To prepare the Chinese elites to rise to the challenges of economic globalization and the accession of China to the WTO, the SEM sought to introduce knowledge about accounting, finance, and management based on international conventions and experience, and developed a joint Master of Business Administration (MBA) program with Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In running this new program, Tsinghua used Premier Zhu's support as the state's endorsement for making internal decisions 'bravely', and testing the government's tolerance, as exemplified by the SEM's self-determination of the standard for tuition fee.

In the past, higher education in the PRC had been free. In 1989, the state began to charge students tuition and miscellaneous fees, and the standards for these fees were set jointly by the State Education Commission (now called MoE), the Ministry of Finance, and the Pricing Bureau (Zhao, 1996). However, Tsinghua successfully gained the right to make its own institutional policy on tuition fees. Tsinghua's three-fold strategy for testing the state's limit of tolerance included: using the market principle of supply and demand to justify the new levels of tuition fees, putting forward its proposal to the state, and interpreting the state's response. According to an interview with the Director of the MBA program, Tsinghua justified its rise in tuition fees to the state with three major reasons. First, the income from the state's appropriation and state-stipulated tuition fees did not truly cover the cost of running joint international MBA programs. Second, Tsinghua deemed its MBA program to be more marketable (in terms of having more applicants for limited places). Third, students could afford to pay high tuition fees and were willing to do so. However, there was no state policy saying that the university could determine its own policy for charging tuition fees according to market mechanisms, so, to play it safe, Tsinghua applied to the state for its approval on the fee increase, putting the ball in the state's court. The request did not receive an explicit reply from the state. Despite this, Tsinghua decided to raise the tuition fees for its MBA program. Tsinghua had raised the tuition fees from around RMB 20,000 *yuan* in the early 1990s to RMB 60,000 *yuan* in 2001, and to RMB 80,000 *yuan* (US\$9,600) for its international MBA program in 2002, making it the most expensive MBA program in China.



Why would Tsinghua dare doing this without the state's approval? The Director admitted that: '[w]e had bravely tried to make our own policy in many areas, because Premier Zhu in person supported us to create new ways in running an MBA program in China'. However, some new practices might touch on 'gray areas' of policy; for example, if there were no mention of whether a given practice could be allowed in Chinese higher education. In the past, the state often had three types of possible responses when there was no fixed state policy: expressed approval, expressed objection, and keeping silent. In the case of MBA tuition fees, Tsinghua interpreted the state's no-reply as keeping silent, implying no objection.

The three-fold strategy helped Tsinghua to gain some freedom to make internal policy in the area of charging tuition fees, even though the state controlled this area. The state's silence could be regarded as a kind of tolerance of Tsinghua's practice, which went beyond the state's stipulation. This is a representative case testing the state's tolerance level in view of the principle of supply and demand. It implies that Tsinghua can use market mechanisms to reduce the state's control and increase its power to make internal policy according to market demands. By using the similar strategy, Tsinghua gained the right to adopt English as the major medium of instruction for the MBA program, without adhering to national policy on the use of Chinese as the basic medium of instruction in educational institutions (Pan, 2006).

Tsinghua's benefit from its relationship with the premier was evident in that it was the Premier Zhu who decided to make Tsinghua and Peking Universities' priorities for state support in becoming world-class institutions. In 1994, the MoE launched the 211 Program to help approximately 100 universities achieve international standards in the 21st century. Tsinghua gained an appropriation of 350 million *yuan* from this program. Furthermore, Tsinghua established a goal of becoming world class, asking the state to grant it more resource to support its development toward the international academic community. However, Tsinghua's request was constrained by the limited resources available for China's gigantic education system (Pan, 2006). The situation was changed in 1998, when Zhu Rongji became the premier of the State Council. Zhu decided to selectively support the most prestigious universities, Tsinghua University and Peking University, reaching their quest to reach world-class status. Then in 1999, the State Council decided to allocate 1800 million *yuan* within 4 years to help Tsinghua achieve world-class status. The state's appropriation covered 75.5 percent of Tsinghua's budget (2383 million *yuan*) between 1999 and 2002, implying the state's strong support (Fang and Zhang, 2001b, 849–850).

Discussion: Strategic Interplay between the University and the State

This case study has showed that, despite working in different political and economic contexts, the influence of the university leadership's relationship with



governmental officials generally helped Tsinghua break the restrictions of state policy and increased its right to make its own policy in pursuit of its own goals. Tsinghua's success suggests that the university can affect the government and gain relative freedom to make decisions in such situations. First, the university was willing to increase academic competence in domestic higher education. Second, the university had the capacity to help national economic development. Third, human relations between the university leadership and government officials created an opportunity for the university to affect the government's policy-making. Through Tsinghua's striving for autonomy, an interesting strategic interplay between the state and the university can be revealed.

The state's control over university autonomy

This article has shown that the state has been the most powerful force in appointing Tsinghua's president. Examples are evident in the appointment of high-ranking governmental and Party officials, the high level of state authority in the appointment, and the role of national presidents as final decision makers in the appointment process. The promotion of Tsinghua's presidents and scholars to higher governmental positions further affects the expectations Tsinghua's scholars have about future careers, both at Tsinghua and at the governmental level. Through the use of appointment and promotion mechanisms, a control and incentive cycle can be seen. Holding the power to appoint suggests that the state is attempting to extend governmental control over the university through university president, who could maintain the authority relationship between the state and the university (Hetherington, 1965). The appointment mechanism puts the university president under the state's control and close monitoring. At the same time, being promoted to a higher position rewards the outgoing university president for his good political performance. To pave the way for their future political careers, university presidents need to perform well in implementing the university's political tasks.

The control and incentive cycle has resulted in the intertwining of politics and academia. This intertwined relationship has further extended the chain of state's power from the government to the university. When the state tightens the chain by prescribing additional political tasks, the university's president, as part of the chain, needs to adopt measures to implement the tasks. Affected by the appointment and promotion mechanisms, a university has not got full autonomy to determine its composition without external intervention. In the area of the appointment of the university president, the state has the final say.



The university's strategies to increase autonomy

This case study finds three strategies that have affected Tsinghua's success in striving for increasing autonomy. The first strategy is a proactive approach to top decision makers. The stories above have shown that Tsinghua's success in gaining a certain amount of autonomy were the result of Luo Jialun and Jiang Nanxiang's directly approaching top decision makers, including Chiang Kai-shek and the Central Committee of the CPC. Inviting the premier of the State Council to be the school dean made it possible to influence the top government decision maker because the State Council is the top authority of China's educational system.

The second strategy is one of negotiation with the government. University autonomy often requires negotiations between government and universities, which can lead to some form of a partnership and a division of powers concerning who will make which kinds of decisions relating to the substance of academe (Berdahl, 1993). Two types of negotiation have helped Tsinghua to increase autonomy. One is verbal negotiation, which is exemplified by Tsinghua scholars' efforts in speaking to the state about their criteria for their presidents. Another type of negotiation is testing the state's tolerance, as exemplified by Tsinghua's three-fold strategy to gain some freedom to make internal policy in the area of charging tuition fee.

The third strategy is to gain the state's trust. Gaining the state's trust is an important factor that influences whether the state will support the university (Weerts, 2002). This study has shown that Chiang Kai-shek's trust of Luo Jialun influenced the MoE's approval of Luo's requests for financial autonomy and exemption from foreign influence to institutional autonomy. Mao Zedong's trust of Jiang Nanxiang influenced the CPC's Central Committee's acceptance of Jiang's request for the right to add disciplines beyond those stipulated by the state. The MoE officials' trust of Mei Yiqi influenced the MoE's tolerance of the administration of Tsinghua by teachers associations.

What makes these strategies workable is the close personal relationships between Tsinghua's leadership and government officials. These relationships provided a direct channel through which Tsinghua's voice and needs could be transferred to government. These close relationships led to close interpersonal communication, which improved both the upward and downward flow of information in the process of decision-making (Miller, 2002). Through better interpersonal communication between Tsinghua's presidents and governmental officials, including national leaders, it has been possible for Tsinghua's presidents to influence the government's decision-making process, and for the university to receive the state's 'blessing'.

This study finds that Tsinghua purposefully develop human relations with the government. On the one hand, Tsinghua scholars persisted with Tsinghua's



tradition of ‘governing Tsinghua by Tsinghua’s graduates’, refusing to accept political appointees. This suggests Tsinghua’s attempt to reduce state political intervention. On the other hand, Tsinghua had an interest in raising its scholars to government office, which, on the surface, suggests an attempt to increase Tsinghua’s political affiliation with the state. This can be seen as a continuation of the spirit of China’s classical institutions, which was one of the close affiliations with the state by providing education for future officials. However, maintaining relations with graduates who are in top state positions can help Tsinghua influence the state to make beneficial policies and increase its freedom of institutional policy-making, as Jiang Nanxiang and Zhu Rongji have done.

Having its school network in the government makes Tsinghua’s relation with the state more complicated. In exchange for giving Tsinghua more resources, the state expects Tsinghua to contribute to the state in terms of both economic modernization and socio-political and cultural transmission. For Tsinghua’s part, it rendered better service to repay the state’s ‘blessing’, and to support its graduates in the government positions. Particularly, Tsinghua was both a factor affecting the formation of specific government policy, and a leading player in the implementation of that policy on the state’s behalf. In this way, Tsinghua gained the state’s trust, influencing the state to give the university more freedom to make internal policy according to the willingness and goals of Tsinghua. In the context of Tsinghua, the complex intertwined relationship between the university and the state is a double-edged sword in the pursuit of university autonomy. Tsinghua gained the state’s trust by reinforcing (not just implementing) state’s policy on political areas, and made use of such trust to pursue the university’s own goals by pushing beyond the state’s limits of tolerance and making alternatives to the state’s policy on economic areas. This can partly explain how Tsinghua played with the state’s power to gain autonomy in the context of China.

Conclusion

This article has provided an interpretive understanding of how the intertwined relationship between academia and officialdom has acted as a double-edged sword in shaping university autonomy in one of China’s top universities. This article concludes that the idea of university autonomy based on the Western experience of higher education is not an appropriate basis for interpreting university–state relations in China. Western university tradition recognizes that university should be a relatively safe political sanctuary, in which scholars should have full autonomy to pursue their own academic objectives, in the absence of any external constraints imposed by individual and/or political



dogma (Niblett, 1972; De Moor, 1993), as well as with freedom from any political or ideological orientation given by the state (Polin, 1983; Thorens, 1993). To guard university autonomy, as suggested by Berdahl (1993) and Wolff (1992), scholars should resist any political overtures, and should not avoid conflict between the university and the state in the face of state intervention and political pressures. However, Chinese higher education institutions are not separate from the state, but are an integrated part of the national modernization project. The state controls the university through its control over the university leaderships' careers. 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.

Unlike existing literature, which asserts that training and recruiting scholars into government positions would not exclude the university from the state's political influence, and that, therefore, university autonomy could not be achieved, this article argues that the intertwining of politics and academia cuts both ways. On the one hand, this relationship inevitably invites the state's political influence on the university. On the other hand, scholars' holding government office help release the university from the constraints of the state's policies in certain circumstances, so that the university can obtain more resources and opportunities to pursue its own goals of development within both the domestic and international higher education community.

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