

# Academic work within a mode of mixed governance: perspectives of university professors in the research context of western China

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**Abstract** Chinese higher education institutions have been subjected to the intensive bureaucratic governance led by the central authorities since 1949. Since the new public management has been a burgeoning social discourse, some reforms have been conducted recently, centering on the competitive contract-centered employment of staff, integration of industrial sectors, universities, and research institutes, and the evaluation of teaching quality at the undergraduate level. By embracing the ideas of new public management, a mode of mixed governance has evolved within the larger milieu of Chinese higher education. By in-depth interviews with 36 university teachers from a university in western China, this study finds that the distribution of income within the academic community has been polarized, so that the career development of new teachers and those in low priority disciplines is curtailed. Additionally, research is assigned more priority than teaching; institutional service has made distracted academics from knowledge. Lastly, Chinese academics' work has been greatly affected by a mixed mode of governance spawned by the unique

integration between paternalistic governance, bureaucratic management, and new public management.

**Keywords** Higher education · New public management · Academic work

The governance of higher education, particularly in the area of state policy, has attracted much attention since the 1980s. As a critical reaction to the new challenges brought by the expansion of higher education and international competition, new public management has become a dominant discourse through which the efficiency, efficacy, and economy, three of the major goal-oriented management skills widely employed in the private sector, have been emphasized (Amaral et al. 2003; Deem and Brehony 2005). Chinese higher education institutions have been under closed state-led governance since 1949 (Agelasto and Bob 1998; Mok 1996). In the past two decades, the rapid expansion of Chinese university education together with fierce global competition has forced several major reforms upon Chinese higher education institutions including the competitive contract-centered employment of staff instead of the “iron rice bowl” arrangement which existed in the work-unit (danwei) institutions, the integration of industrial sector universities and research institutes, and the evaluation of teaching quality at undergraduate level. These changes are the result of a state-led policy focusing on the enhancement of teaching quality in Chinese universities and have led to the birth of a unique mode of mixed governance resulting from the marriage of the new global trends in public management with the new local environment of Chinese higher education.

This study uses a qualitative research approach to find answers to the following three questions arising from how

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the work of academics has been affected within the context of this changing governance in contemporary Mainland China, namely (1) How have the current reforms of governance influenced working conditions within and among different groups of university teachers? (2) How have the current reforms of governance influenced academic work in terms of teaching, research, and service? (3) What forces have affected academics' work in universities?

To answer these questions, this paper will first offer a brief literature review of new public management and describe the three recent major reforms in Chinese higher education. This will be followed by an outline of the research methodology and a detailed presentation and analysis of the data. The three main effects of the resulting mixed governance and the response by academics to the new scholarship of academic work will then be analyzed and discussed in the rapidly changing Chinese context.

### **The management of academic work: old issues in a new era**

The literature shows that, traditionally, a high level of academic freedom under autonomous collegial governance has been highly valued by Western universities. Academics regard each other as equals, working together with minimal hierarchical divisions and maximum trust, which makes the pursuit of truth possible (Van Vught 1989; Deem 1998). However, in China, while the collegial governance model has long been discussed and supported in theory by academics, it has not existed in reality. Since 1949, Chinese higher education institutions have employed a bureaucratic management model that can best be described as "paternalistic management" which is deeply rooted in Chinese traditional culture (Chen and Farh 2010, p. 599). Consequently, a hierarchical, centralized, and well-organized bureaucratic network developed within the Chinese higher education system (Agelasto and Bob 1998; Ruth 1999). Bureaucracy here is defined as the tendency to manage an organization by adding more contacts and adherence to rigid procedures and a hierarchy of offices with fixed areas of jurisdiction specified by laws or administrative regulations. Decisions are made on the basis of the written regulations (Weber et al. 1991). Hall (1968) pointed out that there are five major characteristics of bureaucratization. These are the following: (1) the hierarchy of authority; (2) division of labor; (3) presence of rules; (4) procedural specifications; (5) impersonality. Within this bureaucratic management model, Chinese university teachers are viewed not only as civil servants who must obey the state policy but also as the foot soldiers of nation building. University teachers were held responsible for maintaining the upper level order in academic if not national society.

Since the 1980s, due in large measure to the process of globalization which has spawned knowledge of the significant role, the market plays and the weakness of bureaucracy in education has emerged worldwide fathering the New Public Management (NPM) ideology. Different researchers have coined various different terms to theorize the practice, including "steering at a distance" (Vidovich 2002), "tight-loose coupling" (Lawton 1992), "separate the steering and rowing functions" (Cuttance 1994), and "remote control" (Goedegebuure et al. 1994). Under NPM, the outcome of academic work rather than the delivery procedure should be the greater focus for government. Management procedures should be regulated by the market since maximizing the use of public finance can best be achieved by market competition rather than cumbersome bureaucratic control (Meek 2003; Kolsaker 2008; Deem et al. 2007; Farrell and Morris 2003). While this market is not a totally free market, but a quasi-market full of governmental will (Jongbloed 2004), steering at a distance does not necessarily mean a divorce from government control. Rather, the government control has been enhanced within the marriage between the market and the higher education institutions (Dale 1997; Marginson 1997).

Keating and Shand (1998) sum up the core features of new public management as follows: (1) a focus on efficiency and effectiveness; (2) de-centralized management environment which better matches authority and responsibility; (3) quasi-market competition within and between public sector organizations and non-government competitors; (4) the flexibility to explore more cost-effective alternatives to direct public provision or regulation, such as user charging, vouchers, and the sale of property rights; (5) use of performance-based accountability to replace particular sets of rules. Olssen (2002) provides a useful summary of the contrast between traditional and managerial models of university governance. From his point of view, the traditional model consists of leaders and a community of scholars using collegial relationships and democratic voting to try to achieve professional consensus. The managerial model consists of managers and employers, relying on the contractual relationship between managers and employers, maximizing outputs and pursuing financial profits. The working relationship is competitive, and the content of academic work changes according to the demands of market forces.

Academic work can be viewed as a knowledge-based engagement which includes teaching, research, and service (Kerr 2001). In the context of the increasing influence of NPM, changes in academic work have emerged. From a teaching perspective, NPM firmly positions students as a consumer whose power to choose and degree of satisfaction is highly valued; namely, teaching is aiming at satisfying the students' need for vocational development

(Kwiek 2003; Malcolm and Zukas 2009). Simultaneously, by narrowing or specialization of course content and modularizing the curriculum, increased standardization, the twin goals of efficiency and effectiveness have been achieved but this has been at the expense of teachers' initiative (Fanghanel 2012; Olssen 2002). Along with NPM's influence on teaching, increased avenues for sourcing research funding have become a major target for reform. This has led to much research being externally funded, controlled by government and external agencies rather than being initiated by individuals (Olssen 2002; Waitere et al. 2011; Suspitsyna 2010). Market forces dictate that most commercial funding has poured into applied disciplines, such as agriculture, business, and engineering (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Since service, as a crucial part of academic work, is a relatively ill-defined area, it has not only been highly valued by NPM, but also become a flexible framework through which more and more tasks are labelled as service (Misra et al. 2011; Demb and Wade 2012). Generally, as Neumann and Terosky (2007) point out, service includes service for discipline, for society, and for institutions.

In China, since 1985, the iron grip of government has been gradually loosened with reforms in higher education adopting some NPM ideology. An official document issued in 1993 stated that "Government has to change its roles from educational provider with the power of direct control to that of an intercessor who conducts the governance through legitimizing, funding, planning, advice on policies and other necessary means" (Chinese Communist Party Central Committee 1993). However, the way by which NPM meets the history of governance in Chinese higher education has led to the emergence of a unique phenomenon. This can be described as NPM with Chinese characteristics. Recent research by Lai (2010) found that in China, at the university level, the administrative dominance still reflects a centralized approach, with a small number of academic administrators holding most of the decision-making power. This study aims to explore how the ideas of new public management have been adapted in the rapidly changing Chinese context, and consequently, what features have emerged.

### Major reforms of governance in Chinese higher education since the start of the twenty-first century

Discussing the three reforms this study has identified, looking first at recruitment reforms, it is found that these have embodied the establishment of "quasi-market competition" and "quantitative performance-based evaluation." Gone, has the "iron rice bowl" arrangement, and university teachers must now compete for employment

opportunities, promotion, and higher salary by improving their performance in research, teaching, and service. Moreover, different career tracks often mean different degrees of stability and benefits. By controlling the quotas of tenure positions, the government has tightened its control under the veil of "quasi-market competition," and quantitative performance-based evaluation has played an efficient role in promulgating state policies. One example of this is that state-sponsored research projects are given more weight than commercially funded or academic research projects within the evaluation system. It is usually those teachers who win the competition for state-led research projects have the advantage in competition for career advancement.

Another reform is the integration of industrial sectors, universities, and research institutes. This has the overt aim of channeling funds into university-based projects as stated in an official document saying, "it is crucial to enhance applied research, by stimulating in-depth cooperation between universities, research institutes, and industrial sectors" (Chinese Communist Party Central Committee 2010). Under the influence of new public management, the government seeks to steer a more pragmatic course to cost-effectiveness in providing public services (Keating and Shand 1998). Although university research facilities and resources have been opened up to private enterprise including university-owned firms, the teaching evaluation system gives more weight to government-funded projects than those sponsored by the private sector. Consequently, the government retains a high degree of control even though the funding system has market-based characteristics.

Since 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Education has been evaluating the teaching quality at undergraduate level through a series of measurable and comparable indicators. By releasing the results of the evaluations, the MOE effectively exerts punitive control over the institutions that cannot meet the required standard. This is because the results of evaluations act as a barometer which publicizes the state of individual Chinese higher education institutions by influencing their desirability in the view of students, teachers, and potential commercial partners. Through conducting the evaluation, the government intrinsically maintains its dominant status in the hierarchy of power relations within the Chinese higher education system.

Currently, the Chinese academia stands at the critical cross-roads of bureaucratic management and the newly emerging market logic (Chen 2003). The Chinese government has transformed itself from the provider of higher education to an intercessor between providers and users, but has used the methods of evaluation to achieve its goals and to maintain its dominant status. Though ideas of competition and collaboration between higher education institutions and the market have been introduced and used

in the practice of higher education governance, this does not necessarily mean that the control of the central authorities has been weakened.

### Research method

The qualitative case study approach to research adopted by this study is guided by the following three questions: (1) How have the current reforms of governance influenced working conditions within and among different groups of university teachers? (2) How have the current reforms of governance influenced academic work in terms of teaching, research, and service? (3) What forces have affected academics' work in universities in Mainland China?

The data have been collected from one university in the West China having a long history as a research intensive institution under the governance of the Chinese Ministry of Education. It will be refereed as University "X." The university has an establishment of more than 5,000 staff, of which almost half are teaching staff. This university was selected as the research setting for three main reasons. Firstly, it has a strong connection with the central government because of its status as a Ministry of Education governed university. Compared with other universities in western China, it received intensive economic support from central government. The second is that engineering and business in this university are at the cutting edge of innovation by comparison with all other universities in China, and these two fields have a relatively close connection with the market. Lastly, being located in the West China means that this university lacks the political and economic advantages of its counterparts in Beijing and Shanghai. The University's main focus was the maintenance of its high status as equal to Beijing and Shanghai institutions and it tried to maintain high standard in research and publications. The data were collected between 2009 and 2011 by interviewing 36 university teachers. The interviews were conducted in Chinese. The quotations in the paper have been translated into English. The two researchers discussed together to ensure the consistency and accuracy for the translation.

Faculties are selected based on purposive sampling. In order to ensure we get the most relevant and richest data that related to the research question, we select teaching staff members from the College of Business, College of Physics, and College of Education. These colleges have significantly different connections with the market and the government. The College of Business has more opportunities to cooperate with the market, and the College of Education has close links to the government-led policy studies but the College of Physics does not predominantly link to either the market or government. The sample

selection was intended to show how this different positioning relative to market and government affects each faculty's academic work. Because Chinese universities adopt a three-tier system, with an associate professor sandwiched between a lecturer, the lowest rank, and professor, within each college, three lecturers, six associate professors, and three professor were selected as the interviewees for the purpose of investigating how academic rank influenced the distribution of academic work, criteria of evaluation, and career chances.

### Findings and discussion

Resource distribution: disciplines and academic rankings revisited

The resource distribution among disciplines and academic rankings has been widened. Ideas of quasi-market competition have been introduced as a result of NPM, emphasizing distribution of resources through free competition while accompanied by the side effect of "winner-takes-all." In other words, scholars with more research output have a greater academic reputation and social capital and can therefore gain more resources than those with less research output.

The high priority disciplines refer to those which have close connections with the market or government can easily attract more funds and resources, such as business. However, some low priority disciplines like Physics have to weather a series of financial crises in pursuit of further development. One of the subjects working in the Business School reported, "According to the statistics of my university, the income of the business school is the highest, mainly because it has more research projects. More research projects, more money." Some research fields, especially those closely linked to government, provide more opportunities to apply for state-sponsored projects than those lacking such connections. A lecturer in educational studies pointed out, "seldom do we get involved in research projects for enterprises. We have more opportunities to do government funded policy researches." However, some disciplines have neither connections with the market nor opportunities to serve the government. A professor in Physics told researchers, "The Department of Physics is relatively poor among all the departments in our university. Simply because there is no extra income; no research projects, no money. It is obvious that the department with higher marketability will receive greater resources. The degree of state support for the basic disciplines, such as Physics is far from enough. I think it is very important to value basic theoretical research, which is, after all, the basis for all applied research."

Along with the status of different academic disciplines, academic ranking is also a critical factor in resource distribution. Academic ranking influences the result of nominations for research projects, which will determine the research funds granted and teachers' emoluments. A lecturer pointed out that "many research projects require supervision by a person holding the academic rank of associate professor as a minimum." As a lecturer, an academic has no chance to achieve success in this biased competition. Another lecturer's comment echoes this point, "In China, all opportunities and advantages are different for the different academic rankings. For example, people have more willingness to cooperate with a professor than a lecturer, simply because a professor will bring many rewards to his co-operators. The lectures, positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy are an 'oppressed class.' The hierarchy is there, you need either to accept it or quit." In the Chinese context, the title of professor equates to an engine for accumulating social capital in terms of all forms of opportunities that will benefit career development. The younger generation particularly has to weather a series of "oppressions" in order to survive much less flourish in the academic tribe.

On the one hand, lecturers can seldom achieve the success of having their own research projects. On the other hand, they are burdened with a lot of assigned teaching tasks. One of the interviewees stated, "We lecturers have much more teaching responsibility than professors and associate professors. Seldom are the professors willing to teach. They are only keen to apply for the research projects." Part of the explanation centers on the fact that the rewards of teaching, both economically and socially, are far less than those of research. Another lecturer's comment reiterated this point, "The results of evaluations last year showed that people at the top of the reward list could gain more than 100,000 yuan (16,000 US dollars). Ironically, since universities exist to teach, the lecturers who do most teaching are at the bottom of the list and gained nothing. All of those on the top of the list are professors. ... How could one think it is fair according to the income difference?" In China, academic rankings also mirror the social capital that scholars have accumulated. As the approval of research projects is highly reliant on social connections, a relatively high status within the ranking system is a key to accessing more resources.

Dissonance of time allocation: research, teaching, and institutional service

The evaluation system accords far greater importance to research output than it does teaching quality and determines promotion. A staff member in charge of teaching put it, "Research papers, especially those published in

prestigious journals with high national and international influence are key to all manner of rankings from faculty to the university as a whole. It is therefore a vacuous claim in my university when it is stated that, *valuing teaching quality stays in the speeches.*" Research is central to an academic career hence the popular adage, *publish, or perish.* With very few exceptions, teachers have experienced some sort of barriers. One participant said "Personally, I want to be a good teacher who gives the students the best training, but the reality is, nobody will give you a medal for being an excellent teacher." A further problem caused by the evaluation system is the changing attitudes toward teaching. One participant succinctly pointed out, "Teaching is time-consuming but if you do not want to be a responsible teacher, time-consuming is just consuming time. Practically, all that you need to do is be there, nothing else. You do not even need to prepare for the lessons. Let the students do the group discussions. Students like discussions because it is interesting. Teachers like discussions because it does not need extra time for preparing. That is definitely a win-win strategy. The question is what does it mean being a university teacher? If the only goal becomes making the students happy, what is the difference between a university teacher and a kindergarten babysitter?"

Another factor that affects teacher's preference for research is economic profit. Though university teachers can possibly position themselves as middle class by comparing their actual income with other forms of employment, the actual income greatly depends on the extra "reward money" rather than the basic salary. An associate professor provides his own insights into this phenomenon, "If I can publish a referred paper in a high-rank journal, especially an international journal, I will get rewards from the university. In addition, research projects which lead to or arise from such publication have some contingency funds which I may, perhaps, use for my own purposes. I guess that people with high income in universities, at least in my university, are those named in many research projects. If you want to be rich by teaching, it is an impossible mission because the salary for teaching is only 40 yuan (6 US dollars) per hour. At present, the price of a three-bedroom apartment is roughly three million yuan (500,000 US dollars). Can you imagine how many hours a university teacher has to teach to buy his family an apartment? The whole life is not enough." Clearly, the two unintended effects of the reform, namely the limited promotion opportunities and widened income gap, have forced academics to devote their efforts into research instead of teaching.

Another divisive element arising from the new reforms is that university teachers still have to undertake administration-centered tasks under the term of "institutional service," including scheduling of student training, curriculum

design, degree course application, etc. This is because the top-down paternalistic governance in place before the reform still functions within Chinese higher education institutions. In China, “institutional service” is not to serve the institution but to serve the person in charge, such as the head of department or Party secretary. A lecturer participating in this study provided a common example, “last semester, when a faculty memorial ceremony was prepared, we were the foot soldiers of the administrators’ ever-changing ideas.” Under this style of governance, the administrator has the unquestionable power to decide who deserves punishment and who receives rewards in terms of work allocation. A new teacher in the sample university told us, “I have to use a quarter of my working time to deal with irrelevant work, especially work serving administrators. In theory, you can refuse to do it, but such a refusal will cause an ‘emotional crisis’ in respect of relationship with the administrator and other senior members and damage your career prospects.”

#### Double disciplining by government and university

Although the government has introduced quasi-market competition into the application for funding for research work, it is still the most important provider of research funding. As explained by one interviewee “A detailed guide will be provided during the application for these funds, we have to follow the guide step by step. In other words, the money controls the direction of research, which means we write the application that the authority will give their approval to.” This effectively means that researchers are practicing a form of self-censorship in their selection of research and only putting forward projects which the government would have selected in the past. In this way, the quasi-markets are simply another layer of bureaucracy adding to the teaching staff’s workload. Indeed, even if the government is genuinely trying to broaden the research and knowledge base, it will be thwarted.

As mentioned above, there is, comparatively speaking, a smaller source of funding available from other bodies. This is compounded by the fact that, in terms of the evaluation and promotion of teachers, research projects sponsored by other bodies are much less valued than state-sponsored projects. It would be logical to ask whether, even though such projects might be more academically rewarding, teachers would be less inclined to engage in non-state funded research as it does not look so good on their CV. Teachers wishing to progress to a higher rank or more prestigious institution would avoid such projects simply because they did not enhance their standing. This supposition is supported by the words of a respondent who asserted. “We always say that we struggle for the working credits every day. The state-sponsored projects will bring

us more credits as rewards; the projects funded by enterprises can hardly function like this. Rather, the evaluation system simply counts the money rather than consider the knowledge value of a research project.”

Launching the evaluation of teaching quality at undergraduate level is another method by which the state controls the teaching progress and forms of examinations. This is achieved because the syllabus, examination papers, and even the rhythm of teaching are crucial parts of the state-led evaluation. If the universities cannot meet the general requirements, they will be penalized in a number of ways. One such way is to downgrade the university. This of course means there is a stronger relationship between the results of evaluation and the further development of the university. This is made clear by comments from an interviewee who made the point. “From my point of view, it (the evaluation) can hardly say a good thing. Because the evaluation system controls us like puppets. But in my opinion, a university teacher should and must have independence to explore their understandings on and approaches to teaching. Otherwise, the so-called teaching quality only makes sense in respect of evaluation rather than teaching per se.”

A third point is that, within the university system, administrative staff control the power and are the source and of decision making. Influenced by ideas of decentralization, the state has changed its governance style from process centered to outcome centered. Though the government seems to have commenced the decentralization of empowerment and some changes have been introduced, these have not served to empower the academics but have been “usurped and manipulated” by senior administrative staff. One academic explained, “The head of the department has the administrative power to do almost anything relating to daily academic work. Moreover, top-down regulations are issued no matter if we academics agree or not.” The idea of the reforms was that everybody could contribute their suggestions to influence policy making but the system is hollow. We are asked for our ideas but they are never considered. An associate professor pointed out that “these decision-makers simply follow the rules and regulations passed down by other more senior management staff. It is useless to point out anything you think does not make sense. If you do not have any power, you cannot be a full participant in the process of decision-making.” There is evidence to suggest that under the reform, central decision makers have more power and control of resources than before. A department head concurred that “all the resources are controlled by the university now. By university, I mean those people with administrative power and they just serve the university as an institution, and the university serves only the state’s known policy goals and purposes.” Thus, academics have little access to resources or decision-



making powers. As administrative positions provide academics opportunities of profit-seeking, to take an administrative position has been popularized among academics in University X.

## Conclusion

This study finds that quasi-market competition led by the reforms limited rather than broadened the resource and power distribution among different groups of teacher in the sample university. The younger generation, especially those with low academic ranking, and from the low priority disciplines like physics and philosophy, seldom has the opportunity to secure the necessary support for their academic work and career development. The resource distribution should affect the power distribution in the university. Also, the benefits scholar received will affect his/her opportunity of academic research, which has substantial implications on his/her academic status. In the Chinese context, scholar's academic status has an interlocking relationship with a possession of certain recourses, power of voicing, and accumulation of social capital. Although there is no controversy about the notion that a "quasi-market" is not a true competitive market but a market run under a government's disciplines, the quasi-market approach has produced the as yet unresolved problem for the Chinese government to deal with. The problem is how to handle the "monitoring of conduct" in terms of governance, and in what manner and range should the income differentials be made more reasonable. How employment progression should be made more equitable?

The employment reform has been hijacked by administrators to position research income and reputation above teaching in university X. Our study provides insights which confirm Boyer's findings that research has more priorities than teaching in universities (Boyer 1990). Not only has teaching as an occupation been labelled as a low status job, but also the dedication to teach has been marginalized in the context of academic work. Although the relationship between teaching and research has not become a major controversy in the sample university, it is clear that serving the institution well has greater priority than providing service for discipline or society in University X. Moreover, under the term of "institutional service," administrators have placed many non-academic tasks upon academics, which distract new teachers and lose them within the academic tribe that relies on the effective implementation of the new mixed governance.

The mixed governance springs from the unique integration between paternalistic governance, bureaucratic management, and the new public management. Teachers are disciplined by several compelling forces in our sample

university. Though the government has shifted from the position of provider to intercessor of evaluation and accountability (Williams 1995), the state-led control remains relatively unchanged. At the university level, the paternalistic governance style still has strong influences on the everyday life practiced within the university walls. Academic freedom and academic power become a disembodied speech in the rapidly changing Chinese academic territories. Meanwhile, the administrative power in University X for this study drives ordinary faculty members to keenly pursue positions as an administrator, through which a university teacher can easily enhance his/her personal reputation and social capital within the existing hierarchy. In this way, they will achieve more resources, ironically, will contribute to the construction of "higher education governance with existing Chinese characteristics" but not enhanced education. Though gender is a critical perspective for probing into the strategies that academics deal with their work life within the current university climate, the observation of our study could not find significant distinction between male and female staff members in terms of the themes discussed above.

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