Policy experimentation and institutional power dynamics in China's higher education reforms

Thesis submitted to the University of Oxford for the degree of DPhil in Education

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Abstract

In response to the challenges presented by unprecedented growth in higher education (HE) since 1978, China adopted policy experimentation (PE) as a means of introducing and testing HE reforms. This study involves four in-depth case studies of important reforms facilitated by policy experiments at different junctures of China's HE development: early 1980s, mid-late 1980s, late 1990s, and early 2010s. Within each reform, two elite universities as 'experiment points' (*shi dian*) were selected. Through cross-case analysis informed by semi-structured interviews and extensive documentary analysis, the study offers a holistic historical perspective on how PE has been used to bring about institutional changes in China's higher education.

The study documents different rationales used for implementing policy experiments. State actors use PE to exert pressure on universities to introduce reforms, to lower associated risks and to strengthen the nation's overall HE policymaking capacity in a volatile and extremely heterogeneous context. For their part, university leaders have adopted PE locally to navigate China's politically charged policymaking environment and to negotiate with state actors more favourable terms for reforms. Therefore, the PE approach enables state-university interactions and power negotiations that create and maintain 'strategy space' for consensus-building and institutional changes. It is an iterative process characterised by central-local interaction and intentionally ambiguous boundaries. The state, however, retains ultimate authority for legitimatising, selecting and expanding policy experiments. It is best understood as elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies.

Over time, China's PE approach has become a semi-institutionalised mechanism for HE reforms. In the various policy experiments discussed in this study, PE functions as a productive, disciplinary and symbolic force at different stages of the policy process. Sometimes it appears to offer a genuinely productive mechanism for producing, identifying and negotiating innovative policy options that may be replicated at a larger scale; sometimes its essential use lies in its generated regulative effect; and sometimes it assumes more of a symbolic role allowing the government to acquire or consolidate reform legitimacy. Policy processes are mediated by these different uses of PE towards either reform efficacy or institutional conformity. This study situates these reforms within broader political, social, economic and historical contexts, and highlights the policy implications for higher education reform internationally.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and most especially since the 'Reform and Opening-up' in 1978, China's higher education (HE) sector has achieved unprecedented growth and experienced dramatic changes. In just the last fifteen years, for example, the number of China's university graduates has increased more than seven-fold (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016). It reflects the high priority the state assigns to the modernisation of HE through changes and reforms to address the needs of social and economic development. This study investigates how policy experimentation (PE), a policy planning approach which sprang from informal grass-roots experiments in the early 20th Century, has now evolved into an important policymaking mechanism.

For the purposes of this thesis, 'policy experimentation' (PE) is defined as a policy process in which an experiment is set up to purposefully generate and test small-scale innovative policy options. These policy experiments are either proactively initiated by local leadership or mandated as a pre-conceived task by the central authorities. Depending on their success, these may later be replicated on a larger scale and even incorporated into China's policymaking processes. Heilmann (2008a) regards this type of 'extensive, continuous and loosely institutionalised experimentation' as a 'crucial policy mechanism' in China (p. 4). The PE approach did not start in higher education, but it has constituted an important force in shaping higher education reforms in contemporary China (1978-).

Policy experimentation has also been used in other contexts. For example, some US states are often described as 'policy laboratories' for testing new policies and systems (e.g. in Greenberg & Shroder, 2004). The idea of PE in the Chinese context, however, has emerged independently and separately from international debates and has

its own distinctive characteristics. As practiced in China, PE first emerged from the Communist Party of China (CPC)'s historical utilisation of experiments in its revolutionary era (Heilmann, 2008b). This study believes that many of China's distinctive modern characteristics derive from the unique political historical conditions that prevailed during that period. The nature and pace of change in China's HE structures and systems are therefore greatly affected by the prevailing national socio-political culture. Moreover, modern China has tended to rely on *post hoc* political justification for changes based on the results of prior, limited scale experiments. This approach, as argued in the study, on the one hand, has tended to create more space for the local interpretation of central policies and discretionary experiments, but on the other hand, has tended to give the central government free rein to act autocratically in making policy choices. Based on these historical precedents, PE in China has evolved into an increasingly institutionalised strategy.

In the Chinese context, there are three major forms of PE: 'experiment regulations' (*shi xing tiao li*) refer to the provisional rules made for implementing experiments; 'experiment zones' (*shi yan qu*) refer to the local jurisdictions with broad discretionary powers to introduce experimental changes; and 'experiment points' (*shi dian*) refers to the specific organisational units or domains where pilot projects and model demonstrations are carried out (Heilmann, 2008a; Zhou, 2011a). This study focuses primarily on the 'experiment point' approach, referring to those selected universities where experimental reforms are carried out.

More specifically, this study involves four in-depth case studies of important reforms facilitated by policy experiments at different junctures of China's HE development: early 1980s, mid-late 1980s, late 1990s, and early 2010s. Within each reform, two elite universities as 'experiment points' were selected. This study builds on

a set of strategically chosen theories, including new institutionalism (in particular historical institutionalism), multiple-streams framework and advocacy coalition framework with a focus on institutional power dynamics. It also draws upon existing scholarship on China's 'experimental governance'. This study explores the following overarching research question:

What role has policy experimentation at public elite universities played within state-university power negotiations and higher education reforms in China?

More specifically, this study addresses three operational questions, explored within the context of specific institutional case-studies:

(1) How are policy experiments initiated and implemented within public elite universities as experiment points? What factors influence this process?

(2) How do public elite universities involved in policy experiments and state actors build consensus for reforms?

(3) How have these experiments influenced subsequent higher education reform?

Through cross-case analysis informed by semi-structured interviews and extensive documentary analysis, this study presents the following research findings:

In China, the central government has sometimes adopted the PE approach as a way to 'smuggle' proposed reforms into sometimes-resistant HEIs that suffer from ideological and structural inertia. Meanwhile, elite universities, from time to time, have also used PE as a conscious tool for initiating changes of their own and negotiating leverage with the central government. For the university, the challenge becomes one of how to maintain a balance between state intervention and institutional practice in negotiating the acceptance of their ideas. The resulting interaction between the central government and higher education institutions is thus an important factor in developing

HE policy and introducing institutional changes in China. This practice is especially noteworthy when the existing scholarship tends to recognise China's universities as institutions that must operate in a highly charged and contentious political environment with minimal autonomy (e.g. in Hawkins, 1983; Zha & Hayhoe, 2014).

This study argues that the PE approach serves as a protective mechanism for initiating and implementing experimental changes. It provides a policy shortcut for locally generated ideas and solutions to enter the policy process. This study explores three rationales for using PE derived from individually situated ideas and interpretations shaped by specific institutional configurations. As the analysis shows, the PE process is embedded within state-university interactions: elite university actors and state actors negotiate power to create 'strategy space' for discretionary operation and build consensus for institutional changes. As a result, PE allows for the creation and existence of intentionally ambiguous boundaries around China's HE reforms. The state, however, retains ultimate power to authorise, to select, and to expand policy experiments. China's HE policymaking, in one sense, can be best understood as elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies. This conceptualisation offers a disctinctive perspective on how PE has been used to bring about institutional changes in China's higher education.

By strategically placing the four carefully chosen cases on a timeline, this study differentiates various types of policy experiments according to certain carefully defined dimensions. In different policy experiments and at different stages of the policy process, PE can assume different functions—'productive', 'disciplinary' and 'symbolic'. Sometimes it appears to offer a genuine productive mechanism for producing, identifying and negotiating innovative policy options that may be replicated on a larger scale; sometimes its essential use lies in its generated regulative effect; sometimes it

assumes more of a symbolic use to allow the government to acquire or to consolidate reform legitimacy. Hence, these policy processes are mediated by their different types and uses towards either reform efficacy or institutional conformity. Overtime, China's PE approach has been successfully adopted and established as a semi-institutionalised mechanism for introducing HE reforms and policymaking. This study further situates these dimensions in their broader political, social, economic and cultural contexts to demonstrate how they are shaped by particular historical and institutional parameters and to explain the formation, adoption and changes of this distinctive reform methodology in China's HE. This longitutidal perspective allows the study to trace the evolution of China's PE, and more broadly, China's higher education policymaking.

Taking the long view, China's 40-year effort (since 1978) to develop a modern HE structure and system has struggled to achieve a balance between state power and institutional autonomy and to balance the adoption of western models with distinctive Chinese forms and practices. This study focuses on the indigenous mechanism as policy experimentation frequently used in China's higher education sector. It enables state-university power negotiations and generates productive, disciplinary and symbolic forces to bring about institutional changes in a rapidly changing and extremely heterogenous environment. By offering an empirical account of four policy experiments in higher education and cross-case comparison, this study provides a distinctive perspective for understanding and explaining the power dynamics embedded in China's higher education reform process and more broadly the evolution of China's higher education governance. The PE approach can be particularly useful in enhancing nation-states' capacity in encouraging, accepting and utilising local initiatives as an integral element in tinkering with existing policy agendas. China's PE practices, therefore, can provide instructive lessons for HE governance and reform internationally.

Chapter 2. A focused review of policy experimentation

2.1 The policy process

2.1.1 Theories and frameworks

In the broader sense, politics is defined as the process of exercising power to influence others (Thomas, 1983). In a narrow definition, politics refers to interest groups' efforts in wielding power through the use of political strategies. Policy, therefore, can be regarded as the outcome of 'routine politics' in which consensus for major reforms is gradually reached through fluctuations of political power relations and 'piecemeal and slow work of central government bureaucracy' (Bleiklie, Hostaker & Vabo, 2000, p. 105). As a result, policy not only refers to statements of objectives and approaches of an organisation, but also implies a set of processes and actions.

Policymaking refers to a set of policy processes that include at least agenda setting, policy implementation and evaluation (Kingdon, 1984; Sabatier, 2007). It is a process of 'successive approximation to some desired objectives in which what is desired itself continues to change under reconsideration' (Lindblom, 1959, p.88). Various theories and frameworks have been well developed in the past decades to explain the policy process. Each model represents its 'conceptualization of how the policy process works' (Neilson, 2011, p.13) and can be roughly grouped into 'rational approach' and 'political approach' (such as in Sabatier, 2007; Neilson, 2011).

A 'rational approach' proposes that research-based knowledge can have a direct impact on policy for the sake of knowledge itself. For example, the textbook approach, also referred as stage heuristic and linear model, divides the policy process into a series of clearly ordered stages (such as in Lasswell, 1956; Brewer & deLeon, 1983) and focuses on factors that affect each stage. Therefore, it allows researchers to systematically analyse the messy policy process and engage in benchmarking and policy

borrowing practices (such as in Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1998; Neilson, 2011). However, criticism questions its ability to explain causality, and its tendency to oversimplify and over-rationalise the policy process (such as in Nakamura, 1987; Sabatier, 2007; Neilson, 2011).

On the other hand, Weiss (1977) regards the policymaking process as a political process, whose aim is to reconcile interests to reach a consensus rather than implement logic and truth, and which is marked by contingency (Kauko, 2013). A 'political approach' regards the purpose and use of knowledge as contingent to many factors. It is never a neat process but one that happens in a contingent and diluted environment in which policy is subject to a set of political, economic and social factors (Bleiklie et al., 2000). This section reviews two frameworks applicable to this study.

Multiple-Streams Framework (MSF) /Agenda-setting Model

The MSF regards the policy process as composed of three streams: a problem stream (including policy problems and their advocates); a policy stream (including a set of possible policy solutions and their respective advocates); and a politics stream (including elections and governments, public officials and their political interests, and political climate and national mood) (Kingdon, 1984). The two criteria for the politics stream are 'technical feasibility' and 'value acceptability' (p. 138). This framework properly recognises the ambiguous nature of policy situations in which there are usually a lack of clear identification of problems, solutions and goals. To initiate changes, policy entrepreneurs would try to connect two or more streams.

There are three insights that arise from this approach that can be particularly useful in understanding policy experimentation (PE). First, its 'non-linear approach to decision-making' (Kauko, 2013, p. 198) captures the intricacies in introducing reforms. Second, according to the MSF, local initiatives and experiments can be regarded as

attempts of policy entrepreneurs—either those within central authorities or those with local power—to connect two or more streams. The theory also partly explains the abilities of policy entrepreneurs to put certain issues on the public agenda with a focus on flow and timing (Neilson, 2001). A successful policy entrepreneur should possess at least three qualities: expertise or leadership position; 'political connection or negotiating skill', and persistence (Kingdon, 1984, p. 189-190). Kingdon (1984) defines policy entrepreneus by 'their willingness to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of future return. That return might come to them in the form of policies of which they approve, satisfaction from participation, or even personal aggrandizement in the form of job security or career promotion' (p. 123). Last, it conceptualises the situation required for policy change—only when the three streams converge with an open policy window. More specifically, when a problem is defined by political elites, a policy option is generated through local experiments, and a favorable political force is in place, there is a possibility for substantial policy changes. That may well explain why only certain policy experiments have been successfully transformed into national reforms while others have not.

However, this theory assumes that the three streams work independently with their own dynamics and rules. However, in reality, factors in each stream influence or even interact with others that may even alter the cause of certain streams. Moreover, some important factors Kingdon (1984) recognises in the political stream, such as elections, only exist in democratic regimes (Neilson, 2001). Last, the theory tends to over-emphasise the role of actors but overlook the power of institutional arrangements. In China, PE has arguably become the strategy of choice in initiating reforms. In another words, there is a routinised pathway for local experiments to enter national

decision-making processes, which may triumph over the significance of occasional political events.

Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and Policy Network

The ACF, developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1988; 1993), focuses on interaction among advocacy coalitions consisting of multiple actors with shared goals or beliefs. They note that policy actors' behaviors are influenced by both stable external conditions and dynamic external factors. Therefore, policy change results from competitions and interactions among coalitions within a policy subsystem and events outside the subsystem (Sabatier, 2007).

On a macro level, it assumes that decision-making is subject to specialists' technical information as well as conditions in the broader system. On a meso level, the best strategy to deal with multiple actors is to engage them with advocacy coalitions. Last, a micro-level assumption is that people tend to ally with those with similar beliefs, values and shared policy goals, and their core belief systems are reluctant to change. Therefore, policy change only occurs when a coalition strives to use policies to achieve its beliefs (Neilson, 2001). It also implies that a 'core belief system' that binds coalitions together is more substantial and inclusive than 'interests'. A strength of this approach is its acknowledgement of and involvement with a multiplicity of actors, especially those in different levels of government, in the policy process.

Advocacy coalition, along with 'issue network', 'epistemic community' and 'policy community', is one type of 'policy network' categorised by Stone (1996). An 'issue network' emphasises the specific issue in debate and involves actors who have expertise or whose interests are affected whereas the network has a low degree of integration and common beliefs (Heclo, 1978). Similarly, an 'epistemic community' is a network of professionals or experts in a particular domain, but with a shared set of

beliefs and ‘consensual knowledge base’ (Haas, 1992, p. 19). A ‘policy community’ is a network formed with a selected few actors with a common understanding and beliefs in a particular policy sector. Similar categorisations can be found in Rhodes (1990), Van Waarden (1992) and Forrest (2003). In recent years, a growing number of scholars turn their attention from ‘policy network’ to ‘network governance’ in understanding education policy (see Han & Ye, 2017). For example, Ball (2016) points out that Policy network can be used as a ‘method’ for edu- cation policy-making and a new and sometimes even reformed ‘representation’ of nascent education governance.

This study is not inclined to fully adopt the two theories present above, but attempts to use some presuppositions embedded in these theories and amalgamates perceptions applicable in its exploration of PE. Another theoretical explanatory power this thesis lies in the new institutionalism in political science.

New Institutionalism

In the past, institutional changes happened within educational organisations were regarded as ‘a process of evergrowing isomorphism of educational forms’ that ‘passively conforming to broader (and already institutionalized) forces’ (Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p.3). In recent decades, education institution is taking on a more central role in the institutional fabric of modern society and subject to plural forces that go beyond the state and professionals.

The new institutionalism has been widely applied to many areas of social sciences, such as political sciences (March & Olsen, 1989) and economics (North, 1990). An institutional analysis provides a perspective to understand why a certain form of institution is selected in given conditions. It can be particular useful to education, compared to organisational theory, given certain distinctive characterstics of educational establishments (such as the loosely coupled system, see Chapter 4 for more

discussions). The unique institution as educational organisations are arguably more concerned with legitimacy than efficiency—to 'maintain legitimacy by conforming to institutionalized norms, values and technical lore' (Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p. 5).

The new instituionalism regards the importance of people's active construction of meanings through their behaviors in institutional building: the meaning constructing activities endow authorities to institutions. It is useful to explanin to what degree shared beliefs and consensuses contribute to the emergence and maintainence of certain institutions and institutionalised arrangments. But individuals' belifes and behaviors are subject to institutional settings. New institutionaisam also emphasises on the importance to explain an individual's perception and behaviors in specific institutional configurations and historical parameters. As a result, institutionalisation is both a matter of legitimacy and of power (Bidwell, 2006) in which 'groups of individuals in some sort of patterned interactions that are predictable based on specified relationship among the actors' (Peters, 2012, p.5) are involved.

New institutionalisan is of particular interest to this study in terms of its capacity in explaning institutional changes. It has a potential unique role in 'analyzing complex and contradictory patterns of institutional change' (Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p. 11) by taking account for the wider environment that encompassed education sector.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991) and Bidwell (2006) attend to issues of power in educational institutions, which is key in this study to understand the dynamic relationship between the state, the university and the society at large that embedded in the policy experimentation and reform process.

There are many schools of thoughts of new institutionalism. For example, normative institutionalism (such as March & Olsen, 1984) emphasises a 'logic of appropriateness' through which norms and values within organisations is central in

explaning behaviours. Therefore, institutional change conforms to the 'logic of appropriateness'. Take rational chocie institutionalism as another example, it points out the possibility for political actors seeking to use institutions to 'alter the behaviour of intendedly rational individuals motivated by material self-interest' (Sabatier, 2007, p. 8) and invite changes.

This study finds historical institutionalism most applicable. Standing between normative institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism, historical institutionalism posits that 'human beings are both normabiding rule followers and self-interested rational actors' and is interested to understand 'why a certain choice was made and/or why a certain outcome occurred' (Steinmo, 2008, p.163).

On the first point, historical institutionalism recognises the importance of history and strives to situate certain events and actors' behaviors within particular political, social, economic and cultural context. Therefore, it acquires more power in explaining certain events by focusing on specific cases. Moreover, taking account of history allows us to look at the dynamic evolution and development in a particular area, rather than purely treating each case as a stand-alone event.

Second, historical institutionalism emphasises the role of structures and ideas (Peters, 2012). It argues that existing institutional structure shape people's ideas and behaviors, which in turn influence the course of institutional change. In Skocpol's *States and Social Revolution*s (1979), it recognises the significance of the structure of state institutions in reforms. Institutions affect behaviors and preferences - historical institutionalists argue that policy choice made in the past has a lasting and largely determinant influence over decisions in the future (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). This path dependency could be used to explain why actors may conform to the existing arrangements or resort to practiced mechanisms.

Existing institutional equilibrium may change due to two factors: exogenous shocks and internal contradictions in existing logics. When facing those exogenous shocks and internal contradictions, historical institutionalism points out that there are different mechanisms that can lead to institutional changes. These mechanisms include 'interest-based conflict and power struggles' and 'social learning and experimentation' (Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p. 10). In its attempts to explain institutional changes, historical institutionalists bring ideas and agency into their analysis (such as Hall, 1989). Therefore, institutional changes often come from changes of ideas of a collective group of powerful actors. In one sense, existing institutional arrangements, actors' ideas and the broader environment (that institutions embedded in) progress as co-evolutionary processes (Steinmo, 2008). By taking account of history, institutions (and context) and ideas (and agency), historical institutionalism focuses on 'how existing institutional arrangements both exclude actions from the feasible set of proposed changes and enable particular new actions' (Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p. 10).

2.1.2 Scholarship on China's policy process

The focus of western scholarship on China's public policy processes has been shifted from policy elites, to factions, and later bureaucratic organisations in recent decades (Xue & Chen, 2005).

In the 1960s, most research on China's public policy focused on elite groups and their influence on policy choices. They believed that China's elite groups with united interests followed the rational choice model and enforced their policy through mass mobilisation (such as in Barnett, 1967). However, there were limitations of the elite policymaking model, such as high probability of major policy mistakes (such as in Townsend, 1980; Xue & Chen, 2005).

With the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, western scholars gradually diverted their focus to fractions, patronage and informal groups with competing interests (such as in Nathan, 1973; Tsou, 1995; Dittmer, 1995), and believed that power struggle among them was key in diverting policy changes.

In 1980s, western literature began to adopt an institutional approach, shifting its focus from informal structure to formal institutions, such as bureaucratic organisations, and their influence on policy processes (such as in Lampton, 1977; Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988). They note that with power devolution and strengthened institutionalisation, various bureaucratic organisations acquire the power to interact with the central authority to influence policy processes. There are various approaches, such as bargaining, referring to local governments' constant negotiation with the central authority resulting in fragmented authoritarianism, and competitive persuasion in which acquirement of information (such as existence of specialists) affects central-local power relations (such as in Lampton, 1977; Halpern, 1988). There is still research on elite groups and fractions, yet elite has become a broader term incorporating elites outside the system (Goldstein, 1994).

In recent decades, a fragmented authoritarianism model, arguing the increasingly fragmented power and authority in China, has gained noticeable popularity. It explains how local discretion allows local officials to promote reforms.

Western scholars have demonstrated a great interest in understanding the formulation of China's public policy and its working mechanism. Many of their ideas are insightful and useful to this study, such as the importance of central authorities, the concept of policy entrepreneurs and the process of central-local bargaining. However, they tend to underestimate the complexity and uniqueness of China's organisational structure and reality, especially the integration of departments and regions at different

levels (*Tiao Kuai*)[1]. Moreover, they largely overlook initiatives of local power as well as institutionalised mechanisms (e.g. policy experimentation) to allow central-local mutual influence. In addition, existing western research does not offer a comprehensive account of the multiplicity and co-existence of various models and practices in China's policy processes, nor is it able to offer a sound picture to capture policy changes over the past decades.

Chinese scholars' efforts in this area did not start until the 1990s, but they have made certain progress. Scholars such as Hu (1998) and Zhu (2008) start with the assumption of an autonomous state and focus on actors' interaction within governments when investigating China's governmental processes. Wang (2006), through his typological analysis of public policy agenda-setting in China, captures the plural players in the process, including traditional decision-makers, actors in policy networks and the public. Chen (2011) proposes that China has a unique 'institutions—elites' decision-making structure, in which the policy process takes place simultaneously in institutions (providing rules and procedures) and elites (acting through policy networks). Interaction between the two levels leads to policy changes. Liu (2012) posits that due to the bounded rationality of policy makers and the contingency of public policies, there is always space for local practitioners to interpret policies according to their needs and validate their behaviors. As claimed by Chen (1995), the decision-making paradigm in China has been shifted from one leader's autocracy, to a group of leaders' collective oligarch, then to the experimental 'crossing the river by groping for the stones' (p. 133).

In educational studies, Lin (2006) traces policy changes in private HE in China. She investigates the repetitive inconsistency between policy statements and real-world

[1] It refers to the fact that China's governance is subject to both the vertical hierarchy between the central ministries and local ministries, which is based on functional departments (referred as *Tiao*), and the horizontal management between localities (regional government), which is based on local needs (referred as *Kuai*). The degree of *Tiao-Kuai* integration is high and sometimes causes undesirable conflicts.

practices, and its influence on policy changes, which is filled with central-local interaction. The policy system sets constraints for institutional behaviors, through its administrative arrangement, regulative power and resource allocation. On the other hand, private higher education institutions as agents actively respond to and strive to break these constraints, thus leaving what the author termed as 'strategy space' for local institutions to deviate their practices from set objectives by the policy makers. The author identifies the strategy space derived from actors' different perceptions of certain policies and attributes it to policy changes in China, which provides valuable insights for this thesis. Her idea of how in certain occasions, municipal governments and private HEIs may 'collude' is also an accurate description of reality. However, she fails to provide an authentic description and evidences of the central-local bargaining process. This is what this study hopes to contribute, in order to explore the central-local interaction embedded in the policy experimentation processes and unveil the state-university relationship in China. This study builds on the concept of 'strategy space' and further develops it to refer to the discretionary room for local initiatives and experiments. Strategy space is created and maintained by constant central-local interaction; it, in turn, allows power negotiations between state and university actors.

2.2 Scholarship on policy experimentation

2.2.1 Definitions

There are various terms capturing the idea of policy experimentation used throughout the literature, such as reform trial, reform experiment, policy experiment, policy experimentation, policy trial, pilot project, model experiment and demonstration project. These terms are all slightly different. For example, a pilot project aims to test 'a particular approach on a small scale' to assess its potential to be successfully implemented in a larger scale; a policy demonstration is used to show the merit of a

selected system, such as to prove that certain inputs can lead to certain outcomes; and a research project is 'a careful investigation aimed at identifying or testing new theories' (Pyle, 1980, p. 132). Another term frequently used is 'innovation', which refers to the 'adoption of an internally generated or purchased device, system, policy, program, process, product, or service that is new to the adopting organisation' (Damanpour, 1991, p. 556).

To avoid confusion, this study uses the terms 'policy experimentation' and 'policy experiment' throughout since they most broadly cover experiments that are either initiated within individual universities or imposed by the state through appointing universities as experiment sites. They also represent a rich connotation that includes, but is not limited to, trials, pilots and demonstration projects. 'Policy experimentation' is defined as a policy process in which an experiment unit purposefully tries out a set of methods and processes, either proactively initiated by local leadership or being mandated as a predefined task by central authorities, in order to 'produce novel policy options' that may be 'injected into official policymaking and then replicated on a larger scale, or even formally incorporated into national law' (Heilmann, 2008a, p. 3). Here 'policy experiment' refers to the specific pilot conducted within a subsystem, whereas 'policy experimentation' means practicing 'experiments' in a collective sense.

In the Chinese context, PE can take on three forms: (1) 'experiment regulation' *shi xing tiao li*) (provisional rules made for implementing pilot projects); (2) 'experiment zones' (*shi yan qu*) (local jurisdictions with broad discretionary powers); and (3) 'experiment points' (*shi dian*) (institutions in which pilot projects and model demonstrations happened in a specific policy domain) (Heilmann, 2008a; Zhou, 2011). PE used in HE reforms cover all three forms. However, this study primarily focuses on

the university as an ‘experiment point’ and its practices while briefly touching on the other two areas during the holistic overview of China’s PE effort in HE.

An ‘experiment point’ (*shi dian*) refers to an institution in which experiment (s) within a certain policy scope is carried out. The experiment point approach has become ‘fully institutionalized at the central government level’ at the end of the 1980s in China (Heilmann, 2008a, p. 7), and frequently appeared in governmental official documents and media report. Among various similar terms, such as experiment unit, model demonstration and pilot site, this study uses ‘experiment point’ throughout, which refers to an institution in which experiment (s) within a certain policy scope is carried out. For example, in the 1950s, when the Chinese government planned to implement a reform in teaching in HEIs based on the Soviet model, it chose two universities, Renmin University of China (as a representative of liberal arts-focused universities) and Harbin Institute of Science and Technology (as a representative of science-focused universities) as experiment points to implement the reform, which at a later stage were replicated by other universities nationwide. A recent example can be seen in the establishment of ‘Experimental Colleges’ in 17 universities in experimenting with the devolution of power to academics within HEIs (Zha & Yang, 2014).

The process of expanding a successful and appropriate experiment point (or parallel experiment points) to a larger yet still limited scale is referred as ‘from point to surface’ (*you dian ji mian*). The process is often accompanied with the promotion of original ‘experiment point (s)’ to model demonstration(s) and policy modification and adaption before national implementation (Heilmann, 2008b; Heilmann & Perry, 2011; Schoon, 2014).

2.2.2 International practice

This section provides a brief discussion on how policy experiments or similar practices have been carried out on the international stage and related scholarship.

Internationally, using experimentation before implementing policies nationally is becoming a strategy employed by more and more countries. For example, in the United States (US), policy trials and experiments are used as a way to evaluate new policies before national implementation since the 1960s (Greenberg & Shroder, 2004). Since 1997, the United Kingdom (UK) has experienced an extensive growth in piloting (Walker, 2001; Sanderson, 2002; Jowell, 2003) in various fields, especially in natural sciences and social sciences.

Generally speaking, there are two types of experimental methods: randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental methods. Some scholars regard RCTs as the least biased way to establish causality and a useful tool for governments to provide unambiguous evaluation of policies (Matthews, 2012, Dec 7). For example, the UK's *Closing the Gap: Test and Learn* program is a national experiment implemented in 740 trial site schools to find out the best way to close the attainment gap for underprivileged students (Churches, 2016). However, the possibility of implementing real RCTs in pure clinical sense in education is disputable. Such quantitative-based measures may be manipulated to advocate or refute certain policies; therefore the data can sometimes bear significant political value (Klees & Edwards Jr., 2014; Johnson, 2014). The quasi-experimental method is frequently seen in international practices, such as before-and-after studies and matched comparison rather than randomised selection. Both approaches fit in with the technical definition of an experiment, i.e., to use 'direct interventions and control groups' rather than 'observational studies or theoretical analyses' to inform policy (Mosteller, 2006, p. 487).

Relevant scholarship has identified five possible reasons to use policy experiments in western settings: (1) to test the likely impact of a proposed new policy; (2) to explore the best delivery mechanism of certain reform policy that can benefit its subsequent design and wider implementation (Greenberg & Shroder, 2004); (3) to use as a symbolic action (Leviton & Hughes, 1981; Greenberg & Shroder, 2004), to justify political decisions, and to 'reinforce existing intellectual orientation' (Whiteman, 1985, p. 206) and to win public support (Shirk, 1993); (4) a policy experiment is used in complex political power relations when there is no adequate support for implementing innovative policies on a large scale; (5) some sporadic elements such as enthusiasm and involvement of particular decision-makers (Jowell, 2003).

There are three ways a policy experiment can influence the policy process: (1) direct impact on legislation or specific policy decisions; (2) change the prevailing paradigm or general intellectual orientation; and (3) the possibility of lowering potential cost of policy failure on a large scale (Stone, 1996; Krastev, 2001; Neilson, 2001). Sometimes its impact is subtle rather than decisive on policies (Greenberg & Mandell, 1991). Moreover, even if sometimes certain experiments do not work ideally, they can still benefit future implementation or inform further policy making (Walker, 2001).

Scholarship based on western practice also identifies two sets of factors that influence the outcome of a policy experiment. The first are operational factors consisting of credibility, timeliness, communicability and visibility, generalisability and relevance (Greenberg & Mandell, 1991), which mainly related to the experiment itself. The second set of determinants can be categorised as policy environment, in which Weiss's (1983) model claims that it is the interplay of three factors—ideology, interests and information that determines the positions taken by policy actors. Sussman (1980) and Pyle (1980) respectively analysed two pilot projects in India. Both cases

demonstrate the problems when institutionalising a pilot project into a national program in which political and bureaucratic considerations triumph over the organisational and technical importance of the experiment. Therefore, political utility and bureaucratic feasibility may become the top considerations for local authorities in initiating or implementing a certain experiment given their awareness of such criteria. Similarly, Gregory (2014)'s study on the Experimental Technology Incentives Program (ETIP) conducted in the US highlights the importance of internal government capabilities in recognising and utilising the policy instrument.

It may be intuitive to think that China's experiential paradigm was learned from the Soviet Union during its historical period of modeling that Party-state. Though the Soviet Union has implemented some experimental projects, they remain at sporadic and inconsistent tools, mostly in factory-level economic reforms, as pointed by Heilmann (2010). The term 'experiment point' (*shi dian*) was seen briefly in the Soviet Union context from 1930s to 1940s, but activities of similar nature was often referred to as 'experiment' and 'testing' (Heilmann, 2010). Policy experimentation was not treated as a positive and systematic paradigm in structuring reforms (Gregory, 2014). In fact, Stalin was strongly against the idea of local discretionary and blind reforms (Heilmann, 2010). The experimental method is not inherent to Marxism, Leninism or Stalinism, but an indigenous methodology developed in China. The systematic and institutionalised use of policy experiment is a distinctive characteristic of China's policy-making and social reforms.

In sum, practice and research in the international use of experimentation provide valuable insights in understanding China's situation. In particular, it highlights the importance of policy environment in initiating and utilising experiments. However, the idea of policy experimentation in the Chinese context has emerged separately and

distinctly from the European debates. The political and historical origin of the PE approach is one of the most distinctive characteristics of China's PE.

Unlike in democratic countries where laws and regulations are enacted *a priori* policy experiments, China tends to issue political justification of pilots' results afterwards (Heilmann, 2008a). To a degree, it allows and even encourages local experiments and innovations. At the same time, it leaves more space for local interpretation of central policies and discretionary experiments. In addition, it allows the government to make justifiable policy choices (Liu, 2010). However, social experimentation in international context, such as within the European Union, refers not to locally generated innovative projects, but a policy tool to allow 'evidence-based' policy-making (Sabato, Vanhercke & Verschragegen, 2017). As Sabato, Vanhercke and Verschragegen (2017) explicitly state, '…relies on a rigorous methodology which includes a detailed experimental protocol, specific sampling procedures and a strict evaluation process' (p.160). Therefore, the 'bottom-up' element is rather limited.

Moreover, whether an experiment will be utilised in western countries depends on its operational factors and policy environment (Weiss, 1983; Greenberg & Mandell, 1991). In the Chinese context, besides the two sets of factors, this study argues that policy experimentation is increasingly become an institutionalised strategy, which creates a policy shortcut for state-appointed experiments to enter the policy process.

2.2.3 China's experimental governance

China has gone through significant changes in every aspect of society since its foundation in 1949. It is of little dispute that China's reform has achieved nothing less than a miracle (Stiglitz & Yusuf, 2001). Florini, Lai and Tan (2012) believe that 'local experiments are the hallmark of how China has undertaken all sorts of reforms' since the late 1970s (p. 4). Similarly, many scholars have attributed China's successful

reforms and rapid development to its experimental, adaptive governance (e.g., Heilmann, 2008a, 2009; Wang, 2008; Heilmann & Perry, 2011; Schoon, 2014).

'Crossing the river by feeling the stones'[2] is a principle proposed by national leaders Chen Yun (1995) and Deng Xiaoping in the beginning of China's Reform and Opening-up era, and remains as a guideline for China's continued reforms. Overtime, China has adopted a 'learning by experimenting' paradigm in which policy experiments are conducted in advance of national reforms. Chinese leaders believe it is important to 'implement policy according to local conditions' (*yin di zhi yi*) given China's extremely heterogeneous conditions.

Through a review of literature, scholars generally recognise the significance of policy experimentation in China to (1) facilitate institutional innovation; (2) identify what works and how it works; (3) avoid false reformist leaps; (4) reconcile political differences and smooth reform processes and (5) serve as a learning mechanism and a formative experience for policy makers to facilitate better governance (Cao, Qian & Weingast, 1999; Roland, 2000; Mukand & Rodrik, 2005; Heilmann, 2008a, 2008b; Wang, 2008). Scholars aptly point out that the central government has the ultimate power to shape the course of a policy experiment, one of which is the power to explain, justify and select after it has taken place. However, overemphasis on the central authority may downplay the discretionary power and non-intervention granted to local experiment points, especially considering the fact that HEIs are constantly striving for institutional autonomy. It may be true that even the boldest local reform pioneers cannot overlook the central authority and its 'ad hoc interference', but it is equally important to recognise that China's traditionally perceived hierarchical governance approach has been gradually replaced by 'administrative decentralization, jurisdictional competition

[2] The phrase was originally proposed by Chen Yun in 1980, but is constantly credited to Deng Xiaoping. Its literal meaning is that 'we don't know how to cross the river, so we have to try it out through touching on stones in the water when crossing it'. It is a guiding principle in China's reforms.

and central-local bargaining' (Heilmann, 2008a, p. 11), endowing experiment points with more freedom and confidence to conduct innovative experiments. The freedom is described as 'conceded informality' by Schoon (2014), referring to 'a creative freedom for trying out new measures' during experiments, but the freedom is 'within an authoritative framework and under constant supervision' (p.195).

There are three types of explanations of China's adoption of the PE approach in its reform processes. When introducing the three possible explanations, the following section discusses existing scholarship on China's experimental governance.

Central-local relationship

The first idea stems from the intricate relationship between the central authority and local power. On the one hand, some scholars regard China as a politically centralised and economically decentralised country in which local forces are relatively free in exploring innovations as long as they drive economic growth (Yang, 1997; Roland, 2000; Cai & Treisman, 2006). The decentralised governance approach provides space for local initiatives (Montinola, Qian & Wingast, 1996; Yang, 1997; Roland, 2000; Cai & Treisman, 2006). In this sense, China's reforms become a bottom-up process in which local power and interest groups serve as the primary force in initiating and implementing reforms (White, 1998). This accurately captures the significance of power differentiation in leading to local experiments, but to an extent downplays the role of the central authority, who can not only initiate experiments itself, but also provide *ex post* explanation to justify its policy choices.

On the other hand, some scholars attribute PE to the interaction between central and local powers. Heilmann (2008a) refers to China's experiments as 'experimentation under hierarchy' (p. 1) in which local innovation is key. But as 'a product of reform entrepreneurship' (p. 4), it cannot enter policy processes without central patronage and

support. Also, the central authority's support is a prerequisite for the emergence of local power (Parris, 1993). Heilmann and his colleagues later developed the idea to 'maximum tinkering under the shadow of hierarchy' (2009) and 'experimentation under the shadow of hierarchy' (Heilmann, Shih & Hofem, 2013). They argue that decentralised experimentation gives room for the local government to operate while the government still retains ultimate control. China's reform has not been a linear, coordinated process, but rather one characterised by openness to unexpected and tentative policy solutions generated by local administrative tinkering and government selective integration. Thus, PE serves as a corrective mechanism for producing transformative changes even in an authoritarian bureaucratic environment, contributing to the country's economic miracle and reform efficiency in a highly volatile policy environment. Wang (2008), taking the idea further, argues that China's government intentionally uses open-ended policy experimentation as a learning mechanism to incorporate local innovations. However, Liu (2010) questions Wang's conclusion. While central-local interaction may contribute to policy experiments, the government maintains 'selective control' through *ex-post facto* justification that often leads to heterogenous, insufficient and ungeneralisable experiments. What experiments choose to do largely depends on the central government and is restricted by the country's political structure. Even when the government does not impose a clear strategy, it still presents itself as a political order to follow. His idea is echoed by Schoon (2014) and his examination of China's urban restructuring in the Pearl River Delta reveals that local actors may enjoy 'quasi-autonomous leeway to experiment, negotiate, discuss and bargain' (p.198), but they are always subordinate to the central government's authority. Tsai and Dean (2014) further propose the idea of 'experimentation under hierarchy in local conditions'. They try to explain why major political reforms often occur in only a

selected few of China's provinces by arguing that the political dynamics of central-local relations and provincial economic conditions play an integral part in the PE process. Their study highlights the significance of interaction between central and local elites and the importance of taking account of local conditions. Lim (2017) argues that the central government pursure national change through some of those locally generated agendas due to the interaction between policy experimentation and institutional path dependency.

These ideas aptly recognises that the greatest strength of PE lies in 'an oscillating multilevel interaction rather than as a dichotomized process of centralization vs. decentralization' (Heilmann, 2008a, p.12). The concept of 'experimentation under hierarchy' provides inspiration and the starting point of this study examining PE in universities with different organisational characteristics. In this thesis, the 'central' mainly refers to governmental authorities (such as the MoE) while 'local' refers to local institutions (i.e., elite universities).

Competition among fractions

Some scholars propose that PE originates from competitions among fractions within the central authority – it is the power relation among fractions with 'different ideological predispositions and local connections' that drives local initiatives and central patronage (Cai & Treisman, 2006, p. 507). In this regard, local experiments are often not purely *local* but riffled with the state intervention and competing interests of central fractions. Those scholars regard PE as a result of power struggles when (1) reform advocacies need to temporarily step back to gain further political support and avoid ideological controversies (Cai & Treisman, 2006); and (2) specific structural preconditions required for reforms are currently unavailable (Roland, 2000).

This explanation highlights the fact that the central authority does interfere with the experimentation process and tensions may arise due to discrepancy of interests. However, the study finds it limited in explaining PE in China's HE reforms. First, in China, HE is a quasi-public good and the best HEIs are all public institutions. Their reforms involve relatively fewer central vested interest groups when compared to political or economic reforms, thus generally involving less political struggle within the central authority (but not necessarily local authorities) but more methodological and strategic disagreements. Second, this explanation regards experiments as a way for local power to affiliate with certain higher fractions but neglects the characteristics of the university as an ideologically oriented institution often seeking its own way for development.

'Reform without theory' mentality?

Another explanation argues that certain aspects of Chinese culture leads to the country's experimental mentality. Some scholars believe that China's reform is one that succeeds without a 'theory' (Garnaut, 2001; Zhu, 2007), leading to an 'experiment precedes reform' model. Zhu (2007) proposes a Confucian conceptual framework combining 'historical combined efforts of command-economy legacy, pragmatic mindscape and utilitarianistic familism' that eventually leads to China's 'no-theory' strategy. Zhu (2007) points out the prevalent influence of Confucian ideology in particular and cultural heritage in general in China's reform processes. As articulated by Hayhoe (2000), 'humanizing modernity' that is derived from Confucian humanism may serve as a way to understand China's educational efforts (p. 435). Ogden (1982) goes even further to conceptualise China as a 'perfect amalgam of a Confucian elitist and scholarly past and a Marxist overlay of scientific rationalism, efficiency, diligence, sacrifice for the future and collective commitment' (p. 105).

John Dewey, a pragmatic philosopher and educationist, has influenced 'the thinking of a generation of political intellectuals and activists' (Heilmann & Perry, 2011, p.77). For example, Hu Shi (Hu Shih), a high-profile Chinese intellectual, stated that 'since China's contact with the Western world, no foreign scholar has projected such great influence on China's as Dewey does' (Hu, 1921, p.151). Cai Yuanpei, a famous Chinese educator, once referred to Dewey as 'Confucius from the west' (Wang, 2010).

According to Heilmann (2008a), Dewey's high regard of experimentalist method in innovating modern science and 'learning by doing' paradigm has inspired early modern China's paramount leader Mao Zedong and his advocacy of an experimental approach to reforms – in 1958 he claimed that 'everything through experimentation' (*yi qie jing guo shi dian*). When Deng Xiaoping assumed power after Mao's death, he explicitly pointed out that governance should be based on actual national conditions rather than existing doctrine or theory (Lin & Dai, 1998). The pragmatic mindscape and acceptance of uncertainty are best presented by the famous claim of 'white or black, it is a good cat as long as it catches mice' (Deng, 1994). Deng's initiation of the Reform and Opening-up policy is an example.

This perspective offers a different angle in understanding China's policy experimentation, providing legitimacy for the central authority's often vague statements and local power's discretionary interpretation of existing policies and objectives, as also pointed by Wen (2010), China's education policy discourse sometimes is ambiguous to allow creative practice. However, such perception would prevent us from understanding the generalisable logic behind various experiments going on in China's reform agenda and lead to an opportunist mindset in which reform is good as long as the shortsighted outcome is useful and politically correct.

Moreover, Zhu (2007) calls for a reconsideration of 'theory'. If a theory refers to the way human beings understand the world, then China's reform is certainly guided by a theory, though differing from the western sense, one that is embedded with robust practical values and cultural traditions. China's distinctiveness is often captured by a vague term 'Chinese characteristics' (*zhong guo te se*) in state rhetoric. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping proposed to build a 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' by adapting Marxism to China's conditions. It remains a guiding ideology of China's development. This intentionally nebulous term is constantly iterated in Chinese leaders' speeches, media reports, and later scholarly debates. 'Chinese characteristics' may explain why none of western originated theories and paradigms can fully explain the peculiarities of China's case.

Existing scholarship also discusses various types of policy experiments (such as in He, 2003; Zheng, 2013; Ning, 2014), upon which the study builds its initial analytical categorisation. A 'top-down' approach is when national policy actors initiate a reform, strategically appoint experiment point(s), revise relevant policy accordingly and expand it nation-wide when proved successful. A 'bottom-up' approach refers to local experiments initiated due to either the state's unspecific political orientation or local needs and personal interests (such as career or material interests). The bottom-up experiments can be initiated with or without governmental support, though formal or informal 'policy hedging' from higher officials is important for local policy pioneers' decisions, as well as in 'legitimating, defending, and scaling up local experiments' (Heilmann, 2008a, p. 9). Scholars such as Teets (2015) point out that political interests for promotion is the main motivation for local leaders to engage in innovative policy experiments. When a local initiative is proved to be useful and gains public support, the government may give due recognition, making it a model demonstration or

incorporating it into public policy for national implementation. As further discussed in the Chapter 3, it was later proved insufficient to capture the complicacies involved in the state-university interaction in China's policy experiments on its own, but it provides a simplified analytical departure for case selection.

Heilmann (2008a) proposes a policy cycle to understand the experiment-based policy process in China (Figure 1).

His policy model is built on the approach of 'experiment point—proceeding from point to surface—national implementation'. This idea of policy diffusion from one or several sites to a larger extent of demonstration sites to universal replication is what is termed as 'staged replication' (p. 5). 'From point to surface' (*you dian ji mian*), a term with Soviet origin, captures the expansion stage of the PE process. It is often accompanied with promotion of original experiment points to model demonstrations and policy adaption to a larger scale (Heilmann & Perry, 2011; Schoon, 2014). It is a key stage of the PE process in that it allows constant policy modification to test its generalisability and acts as a learning mechanism for the central government.

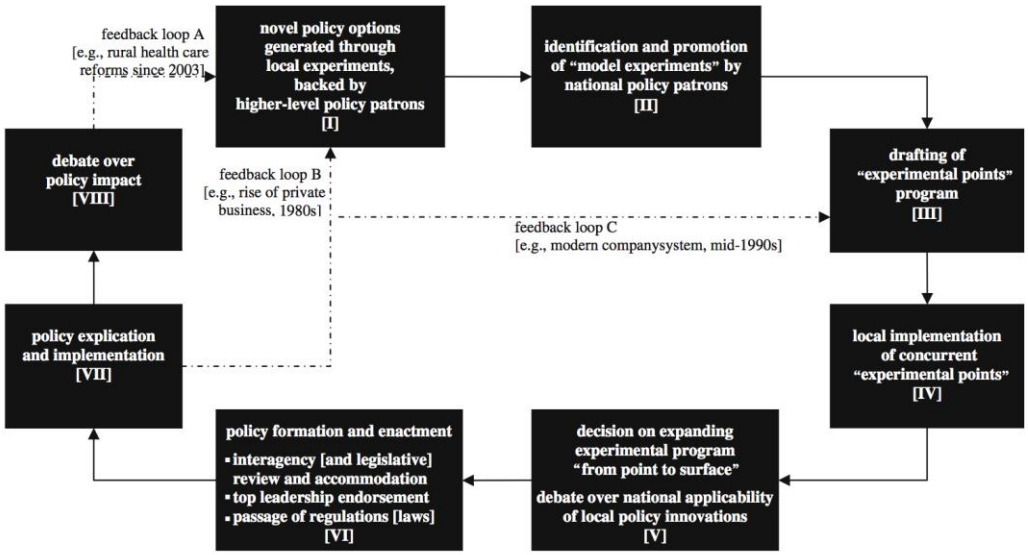


Figure 1 **China's experimentation-based policy cycle**
Note. Source: Heilmann (2008a)

To use the Multiple-Streams Framework to understand Heilmann's framework, when problems are identified, local decision-makers ally with national patronages to conduct experiments (a problem stream). When a certain local experiment is promoted to become a 'model demonstration', the original experiment points are normally endowed with more discretionary and regulative power. Through local experiments, a set of solutions is generated, both in terms of content and delivery mechanism (a policy stream). When a favourable political environment is in place, coupled with an opening of policy window, there is a possibility for national implementation with a certain degree of adaptation or re-modification (a political stream). Heilamnn's framework is, in essence, an idealised policy cycle capturing how PE could be promoted into national policies with interplay between local initiatives and national patronage.

However, there are three shortcomings in his framework in its application to this study. First, one pathway he overlooks is the state's strategic and deliberated (formal) policy initiatives and its voluntary selection of some experiment sites. Heilmann thinks it is meaningless to distinguish whether an experiment is a bottom-up or top-down one since the key is the central-local interaction. However, how central and local interacts and the degree of state intervention and local discretionary space differ according to the approach of the experiment. Therefore, analysing experiments respectively rather than as an undifferentiated whole can provide a better understanding of PE.

Second, Heilmann uses several cases to support his framework. These cases come largely from the political-economic area, whereas HEIs are unique in several substantial ways. For example, the university's unique organisational structure as a 'loosely coupled system' (Weick, 1976), an anarchic structure (Cohen & March, 1986), and bureaucracy-professionalism dualism (Gumport, 2000) may explain its sometimes resistance to changes and its insist on certain values or directions for development.

Chinese distinctive HE governance and academics' mindset (discussed in Chapter 4) also leave a noticeable imprint on experimental reforms occur in higher education sector.

Last, Heilmann's framework and existing scholarly at large fails to capture what is going on in the experimentation process. Heilmann's model provides a broad-based cycle framing the context and sequence of policy experimentation, but it assumes that the state takes a rather non-intervention stance during the experimentation process. However, it might not always be the case. What is the state's stance in those experiments strategically initiated by itself? If there is government intervention, is it deep involvement or ad hoc intervention? How does the university seek its 'strategy space'? Is there any tension between the state's intentions and institutional practices? If so, does it influence the outcome of the experiment and its utilisation? These questions remain unanswered in his work and existing scholarship. They are of great significance if we want to fully understand how the policy experimentation approach works in China's HE reform processes, and how, by using it as a mechanism, the state and universities are able to negotiate changes, bargain for powers and maintain the delicate balance between state intervention and institutional autonomy.

Much of the existing literature on China's experimental governance is built on Heilmann's concepts and framework. The idiosyncratic developmental pathway of modern China differs from foreign models and paradigms. According to Heilmann and Perry (2011), it can be characterised as being captured by 'guerrilla-style policymaking', with the capability of generating 'an array of creative tactics for managing sudden change and uncertainty' (p. 7). It calls, furthermore, for the 'circumventing of the existing rules, overcoming constraints, and maximizing one's own manoeuvrability' (Heilmann & Perry, p.15) to experiment, learn and adapt under uncertain situations. It stands in contrast to law-based policymaking with its strong institutional constraints.

The ‘adaptive capacity’ of China’s experimental governance is at the center of an explanation of its developmental success. This study builds on existing scholarship on China’s experimental governance to explore how PE plays out in higher education, involving state actors and university actors in a dynamic interactive process and bringing about innovations and institutional changes that shape the landscape of HE development in China.

2.3 Research questions

Through a review of literature, this study is able to identify the current themes related to policy experimentation in general and to Chinese practice in particular. Policy experimentation did not start in higher education, but it has constituted an important force in shaping higher education reforms. It has been frequently used in China’s education sector as an approach to initiate change, as demonstrated in the prevalent usage of the rhetoric in the government’s policy documents and official media outlet (discussed in detail in Chapter 4.2). Existing literature, however, predominantly focuses on economic and social reforms facilitated by PE, while higher education is left largely untouched. Moreover, there is little systematic inquiry in examining what actually happens in the ‘experiment point’ stage, and, in particular, how different actors’ ideas and behaviors shape the outcome of policy experiments. This study fills this gap by providing an empirical account of four important education reforms enabled through PE unfolded at different junctures of China’s higher education development.

In addition, there is a tendency to borrow western theories and paradigms to understand China’s practices in social sciences scholarship. It is arguably true that with the rapid changing landscape of China’s education, ‘Chinese educational reform will move on a track that is not fully explainable by using theories or frameworks borrowed

from elsewhere' (Ming, 1986, p. 26). However, nor does it conducive to attribute everything unexplainable to 'Chinese characteristics'.

This study does not intend to fully follow one specific theory, but relies on theoretical underpinnings from a set of theories: multiple-streams frameworks, advocacy coalition framework and historical institutionalism with a focus on power on shaping the state-university interactions and negotiations. It also builds on existing literature on China's policy experimentation and experimental governance. The deliberate choice of combining a set of 'middle-range theory', under an interpretivist paradigm, is to provide analytical simplification of complicated realities in order to offer a focus to allow a story being told (Walford, 2011), while enabling an link between micro-level individual behavior and interpretation and the broader social, economic, political and culture contexts. As pointed out by Peters (2012), 'scholars can acquire greater analytic leverage on some questions employing one or another approach, but the macro level analysis should be informed by the analysis of individual behavior produced in other areas within the discipline' (p.2).

Against this backdrop, this study explores the following overarching research question:

What role has policy experimentation at public elite universities played within state-university power negotiations and higher education reforms in China?

More specifically, this study addresses three operational questions, explored within the context of specific institutional case-studies:

(1) How are policy experiments initiated and implemented within public elite universities as experiment points? What factors influence this process?

(2) How do public elite universities involved in policy experiments and state actors build consensus for reforms?

(3) How have these experiments influenced subsequent higher education reform?

These three operational questions focus on how effectively the PE approach has been utilised to reconcile the state's intentions and institutional innovations and how it has functioned to mediate the power negotiations between the state's HE priorities and university autonomy. This study examines how the PE approach transforms the HE reform process into an arena where the state and institutions interact, negotiate and shape the outlook of China's higher education development.

In pursuit of this purpose, the study adopts a multiple case study design with embedded sub-cases to capture a holistic view of the characteristic complexities and intricacies embedded in China's policy experimentation and reform process.

Chapter 3. Methodological considerations

3.1 Introduction

The chapter discusses essential methodological issues in this study in order to present a detailed account of how and why the researcher made certain decisions in different stages of the research process, and measures taken to ensure the successful implementation and presentation of this study.

In particular, the chapter discusses the research design in terms of the theoretical considerations, rationales for choosing a multiple case study design and the sampling strategies. The chapter further describes the data collection process in detail, including matters concerning collecting interview and document data, the pilot study and the main fieldwork. The data analysis section is focused on the discussion on interview data and document data, and how to combine the two sources of data to link with theories. Last, the chapter discusses issues concerning validity, reliability, ethics, reflexivity and translatability.

3.2 The research design

Research design was 'the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions' (Yin, 2009, p. 26). This section presented the theoretical underpinnings of this study, the chosen approach, i.e., a multiple case study, and case selection and sampling strategies.

3.2.1 Theoretical considerations

This study used Crotty's (1998) four-element, i.e., methods, methodology, theoretical perspective and epistemology, as a guideline in the research design.

First, what *methods* would be used? This study employed document searches and interviews for data collection; and qualitative methods for data analysis. More details will be discussed in 3.3 and 3.4.

Second, what *methodology* governed the choice and use of particular methods? This study was a policy analysis featuring a multiple case study, with embedded sub-cases within each holistic case. Case study allows 'in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues in their real-life settings' (Crowe et al., 2011). In line with this approach, the researcher attempted to understand and untangle realities from the perspective of participants. Therefore, it justified the researcher's stated intention to carry out semi-structured interviews.

Third, what *theoretical perspective* informed the methodology and conceptualisation of this study? The philosophical stance this study took is interpretivism. According to this stance, reality is socially constructed rather than objectively determined, and emphasising specific social settings in which people participate in can provide contextual depth (Kelliher, 2005). It seeks 'culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

Last, what *epistemology* was embedded in the theoretical perspective? This study was situated within social constructivism, which holds that meaningful realities are socially constructed and knowledge is a product of social processes and interactions between human being and their world (Burr, 2015). People can and do influence the social worlds. Different people may construct meaning in different ways, and it is important for qualitative researcher to understand those being studied from their perspectives (Gorman & Clayton, 2005).

3.2.2 The case study approach

In line with its objectives and its choice of epistemology and theoretical stance, this study fitted squarely into the tradition of case study research, as 'an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon, set within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin,

2009, p. 18). Yin (2009) pointed out that the term ‘contemporary’ was used as opposed to historical ‘dead’ past with no alive informants, in which case the common approach used was histories. In this study, for those past events that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, there were still informants alive and accessible, allowing the researcher to collect and analyse different types of data beyond pure historical studies. More specifically, this study used a multi-case, embedded sub-case design (see Figure 2).

Case study was frequently used as an analytical tool in education policy studies (Yin & Heald, 1975; Pal, 2005). The researcher believed that the adoption of a case study paradigm could provide an analytical perspective to investigate the intricacies and peculiarities of a particularly complicated topic as policy experimentation (PE).

The choice of a multiple case design over a single case study enabled replication logic throughout data collection and analysis phases to ensure external validity. In addition, multiple cases that were deliberately chosen in a timeline provide a comparative scope in understanding the changing practice and roles of PE in China’s higher education (HE) reforms. Thus, a multi-case with embedded sub-case design allowed both within-case comparison and cross-case comparison; comparison like such help us better understand to what degree PE can be used as a strategy in which the state and the university negotiate power and solicit changes.

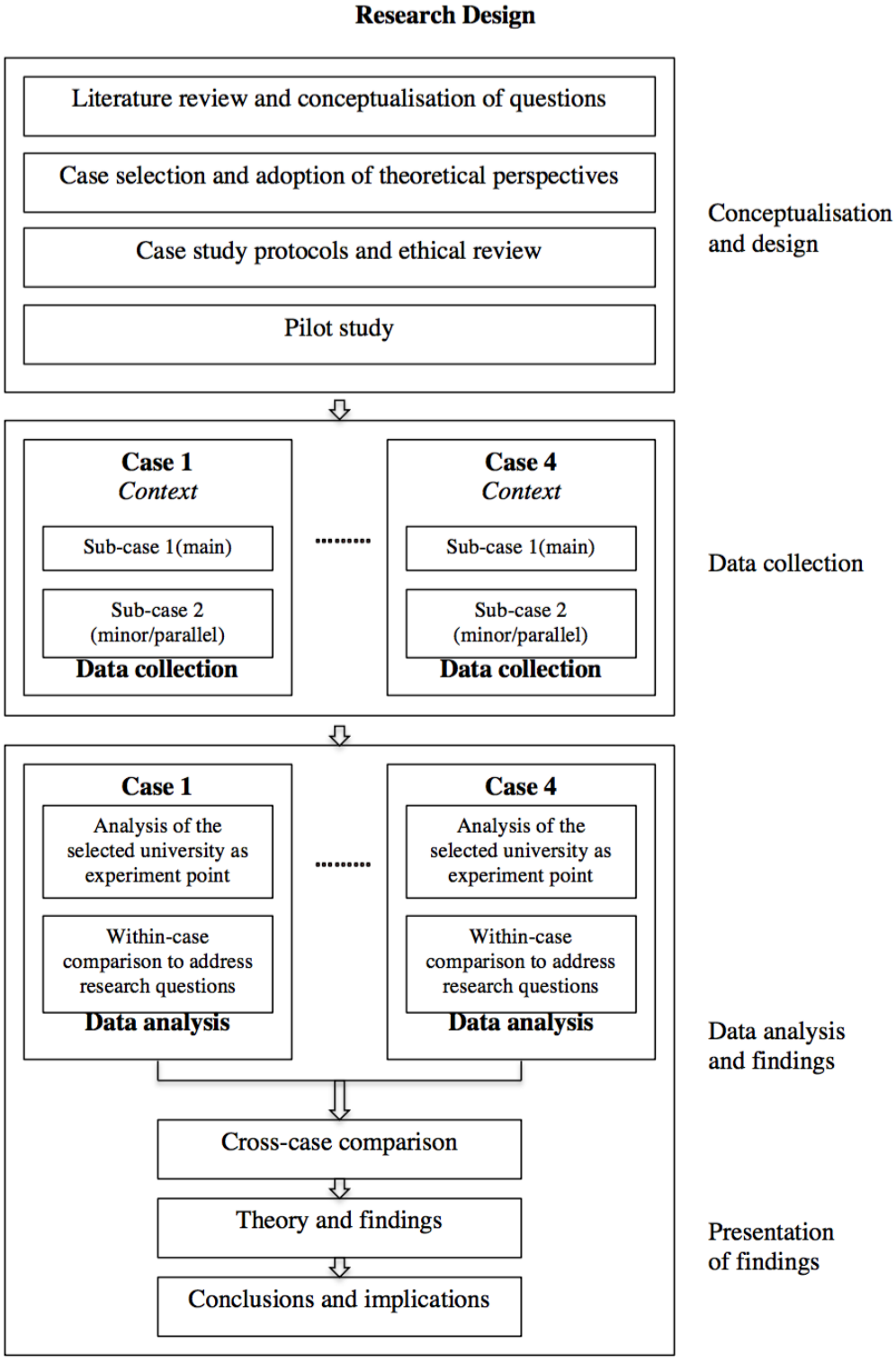


Figure 2 **Research design**
Note. Adapted from Yin, 2009

3.2.3 Choice of cases and methods of sampling

The introduction of the Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978 was a milestone in China's development. Its influence went beyond economic reforms to almost every aspect of society, marking a new era of the contemporary China. Thus, this study chose 1978 as a starting point for analysis because both educational system and the whole country went through dramatic changes since then. This study investigated PE in four periods, i.e., the beginning of the 1980s (Period I), the middle to late 1980s (Period II), the late 1990s (Period III) and the early 2010s (Period IV) respectively. These periods featured some of the most comprehensive HE reforms in contemporary China (1978-), which corresponded to the broader social and economic changes at the same time. These periods also encompassed various policy experiments to provide representative cases to choose for investigation. A time dimension could provide more insight into understanding the changing practices and roles of PE in China's higher education.

In China, HE can be delineated into two tracks—the general route of HE system-wide development and the elite route of some selected institutions. In a one-party authoritarian country, the state has great influence on the course of HE. China tends to launch special projects for and give preferences to elite-oriented universities. A simple distinction is how a university is administrated and financially supported. By 2014, among 1,730 public universities in China[3], there are 75 universities directly administrated by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) and 39 universities by other national ministries. They generally enjoy more desirable policy preference and financial support, and are able to recruit high-quality students. They are expected to be the pioneers of reforms and leaders of Chinese universities. The rest of the public universities mainly operate under the administration of provinces and municipalities.

[3] In 2014, there are also 799 private universities in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016). But they are generally regarded as low quality in China's HE system and beyond the scope of this thesis.

Such arrangement put universities directly under government control, either at the local level or the national level. The two tracks have different missions and tasks, and therefore play different roles in initiating and/or undertaking policy experiments for the country's HE reforms—they are constantly started in/by elite universities. Given the research questions, this study primarily focused on public elite universities since they are under the most direct influence of relevant national policies and they interact more frequently with state bureaucracies, in both informal and institutionalised ways. In addition, they generally have greater importance in China's HE reforms, with a pre-assigned role in initiating reforms for Chinese universities to continue to meet the demands of the contemporary higher education. Moreover, due to their importance, they have acquired relatively more leverage, compared to non-elite universities, in negotiating with the state.

Being aware of the often-contingent nature of the data chosen, this study made careful consideration in selecting cases and sub-cases.

In the initial stage, this study developed an analytical categorisation as the starting point in conceptualisation and case-selection. It divided policy experiments into top-down and bottom-up ones, and made further differentiation within according to the dimensions of the state's initial guidance and the state's initial stance, forming a four-type categorisation. Such categorisation, at a later stage, was proven to be an over-simplification of the reality. An experiment was usually a dynamic and iterative process between the state and institutions rather than a linear one. This analytical typology, however, provided a useful guidance in choosing cases to represent the potential complexity and intricacies involved in various policy experiments. Hence, the four cases selected roughly fell into each category, standing out as a *typical* and *critical* representation of policy experiments in Chinese elite universities.

At the same time, the chosen cases were intrinsically significant or interesting in themselves, as a selection standard proposed by Walford (2011). It was hoped that an account of each policy experiment itself can provide a new perspective and valuable insight into Chinese HE reforms. Moreover, they were instrumental in contributing to the understanding of the research questions.

The 'within-case characteristics of a case' (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 296) were also taken into consideration in the case selection. In each selected case, at least two experiment points were available to engage in within-case comparison and attain anonymity of each individual university.

In each experiment, this study further selected two sub-cases, i.e., an individual university as experiment point (Table 1). To protect the anonymity, each institution selected was given a pseudonym; the same institution might not have the same name in every case. The choice of sub-case considered the significance of an institution as an experiment point and 'practicalities of negotiating and maintaining access' (Rose, Spinks & Canhoto, 2015, p. 6). During the case screening process, this study reviewed relevant documents and made informal contacts with some people to ensure the richness (e.g. multiple sources of evidence) and availability of data. The pilot study also helped the researcher refine and re-focus case selection by evaluating their fit with the research questions proposed.

Yin (2009) emphasises the importance in identifying and clarifying the 'unit of analysis', that is, the precise focus of a study. The unit of analysis in this study changed as the hierarchical analysis proceeds. For analysis of each case, the unit of analysis was the university as an 'experiment point' (sub-case). The focus was on the institution: its practices, perceptions, attitudes, and interaction with others. Building on that, the unit of

analysis became a policy experiment (case). The focus was on the experiment: its embedded power negotiation process and its role in the reform.

Table 1 ***Selected cases and sub-cases in this study***

Period	Experiments	Experiment points (pseudonyms)
I: The beginning of the 1980s	In the early 1980s, four universities actively initiated and implemented a set of reform strategies in gaining more university autonomy. Some of them were later recognised by the state and subsequently promoted to the national scale.	Suwen University (main focus); Wantong University (minor)
II: The middle to the late 1980s	In 1983 and later again in 1985, the state appointed two universities as pilot sites to experiment the employement assignment system of university graduates. The reform measures were later (slowly) expanded nationwide.	Tongye University and Shirui University (equal focus)
III: The late 1990s	In 1996, a university sought new approach to developing a modern distance education system in China. Its controversial measures caused opposition from the Ministry of Education. After rounds of negotiation, this institutional innovation became a state-advocated policy—the state further appointed dozens of official experiment points in this respect.	Tanhua University (main focus); Shannan University (minor)
IV: The early 2010s	In 2010, the state explicitly appointed 26 universities to conduct experiments in building modern university system, in which 'establish Bylaws for higher education institutions' is an integral measure.	Tiankui University (main focus); Shuisu University (minor)

Note. To protect anonymity, the same institutions were given different pseudonyms in different cases.

With an interpretivist, constructivist and qualitative approach pervading the research, what sources of data for collection and analysis were the most appropriate for this study? Case study tends to 'lend itself to a particular method of inquiry', emphasising 'the collection of multiple sources of rich data' (Lam, 2014, p. 53). As noted by Bardach (2009), almost all likely sources of data in policy research 'fall into two general types: documents and people' (p. 69). Hence, the study primarily relied on two sources of data: interviews and documents.

3.3 Data collection

This section presented an overview of essential issues in the data collection process, which was completed through two rounds of fieldwork as a pilot study and a

main study in China. This section discussed strategies involved in collecting interview data: sampling, negotiating access, entering the field, challenges and limitations; and decisions for using documentary evidence as a qualitative complement to interview data and a quantitative mapping effort.

3.3.1 Interview

Interviews are one of the most widely used data-collecting instruments in case studies (Yin, 2009). It allows the researcher to collect in-depth information about the topic, understand issues from the perspective of the interviewees and get the meaning behind the factual statements (Kvale, 1996). This study used semi-structured interviews, comprising of main questions, follow-up questions and probes, in order to achieve depth, detail, vividness, richness and nuance (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Sampling

This study deliberately chose three types of targeted interviewees in order to investigate their interpretations of policy experiments and reforms involved from their own stance and construction of reality.

The first type was university stakeholder, i.e., people who was involved in the experiment processes. Those people normally hold or held leadership roles in decision-making or participate in policy research. Those forefront informants were key in addressing research questions of this thesis, helping reconstruct the picture of the actual initiating, implementing and negotiating process. It was, however, important to note they might consciously or unconsciously present a better version of institutional efforts *vis-à-vis* the state.

To get a full picture of the story, the second type of interviewees was current/past state officials and civil servants with experience in working with policy experiments. They were generally education policy-makers in MoE and personnel from

state's special reform groups. Their accounts reflected their interpretation of the involved experiments and their interaction with relevant universities; meanwhile, it could be used to verify and corroborate claims from university stakeholders to delineate an authentic picture of the story. Their accounts, similarly, might be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by their potential distortion of reflection. This type of interviewee also included people involved in special policy research groups or institutions that were appointed by authorities to conduct policymaking related research. One example of those research institutions was the National Academy of Educational Administration, which was responsible for a wide range of educational policymaking research. Those institutions are referred to as 'informal authorities' in China (Xue & Chen, 2005, p. 102). People involved had insider knowledge of relevant issues and were generally easier to access compared to state officials.

The last type of interviewees was scholars with an extensive knowledge of China's HE reforms and experiments. Their position allowed a relatively impartial, third party perspective to complement the reconstruction of the policy experiment. Their knowledge was less detailed for the actual experiment, and their contextually situated expertise help to link the meso-level experiment to the wider environment for explanatory exploration. Those scholars might come from either the same or different universities that were selected for the study since the selection of scholars were based on their expertise and experience in this area, other than their affiliation with any particular institution. For those belong to the same institutions as the ones involved in the experiment, the researcher is aware of potential conflicts of interest, and the possibility that those scholars hold biased perceptions influenced by their allegiance and stance.

This study used purposive sampling by deliberately looking for participants with particular qualities. It engaged with theoretical sampling and snowball sampling given the nature of the research questions and the research design. Theoretical sampling selected interviewees based on information required by the analysis (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao, 2004). In this study, identification of an initial sample of interviewees was largely facilitated by document searches, as suggested by Yanow (2000), especially policy papers and institutional reports to trace key actors involved in the selected experiments. Snowball sampling replied on existing interviewees to connect and recruit future interviewees, and was especially applicable to groups who are hard to identify or access (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004)—such as those informants involved in certain experiments in the past. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked the interviewees for recommendations and introduction to other potential interviewees.

Negotiating access and anticipated problems

One of the biggest anticipated challenges of this study was to negotiate access to potential interviewees. As a policy analysis that heavily relied on elite interviewing, targeted interviewees were generally difficult to access or find proper alternatives. Moreover, many of those involved in the experimental reforms in the 1980s and 1990s had either passed away or were difficult to track down. However, on the positive side, it indicated that those who could be contacted in those cases were currently not in the office. They tended to be more open and honest in discussing past events and their related experience, offering a more authentic picture of what happened in the past. It was also interesting to interpret 'the ways in which (once) powerful interviewees were prepared to reconstruct their memories of important aspects in their lives' (Selwyn, 2013, p. 349) since the interview data largely represents the social constructions of their memories of specific past events.

This ‘access’ challenge, as tested by the pilot study, could be tackled through strategic utilisation of the researcher’s professional and personal networks. Access to potential interviewees was acquired through both personal connection and official contact based on purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Personal connection relied on the researcher’s well-developed network with a certain elite university and its connection with peer institutions. Official contact was acquired through sending official emails to potential interviewees. Although the researcher was familiar was one specific institution, she did not possess a special knowledge in terms of the subject matter. Therefore, it did not have any difference in doing research when compared with in any other institutions.

However, another problem arose regarding the most recent, current case. Two interviewees from the MoE went ‘off-the-record’. However, even when this happened, interviewing them could still generate valuable insights since they tended to be more open and honest. It was also possible to circumvent this problem by finding alternative resources of data to supplement interviews with current state officials, such as from a wide range of documents, which have become more available and prevalent now than decades ago, to trace and corroborate what was learned from those interviews.

The preparatory phase

The pre-interview phase was an integral part of the research design and implementation. The researcher undertook a large amount of preparatory work to ensure effective fieldwork.

First, much emphasis was given to the development of an efficient and effective schedule to ensure access and actual interviews. An interview protocol (see Appendix I) was prepared to guide the process. The researcher collected background information on the participants, along with documentary evidence, to ensure the relevance and

significance of questions asked. The contact with interviewees was mainly facilitated through emails, in which the researcher specified the date and location of interviews, and attached a participant information sheet outlining all essential information relevant to the study (Appendix II-a), an informed consent (Appendix II-b), and a semi-structured outline of interview questions tailoring to fit the specific experiment and institution (Appendix III).

Concurrently, this study started a preliminary analysis of existing documents to produce a narrative account of each case, to fully make use of the interview opportunity to ask relevant questions, and to let interviewees explain or corroborate documentary evidence wherever needs clarification.

In this phase, the interview protocol and written accounts of four cases provided valuable background information and guidance to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the fieldwork.

The actual interview phase

The researcher followed the interview protocol throughout the interviews. The qualitative interviews were semi-structured, with a given set of research questions tailoring to each policy experiment and experiment point. In the process, I periodically revised the questions to reflect progress and new thinking. For example, a piece of information acquired from an interview might become a key point in other subsequent interviews. The benefit of following a semi-structured procedure was to encourage the interviewees to respond in a more forthcoming and proactive way, and to probe more details that the researcher may not be able to pick up in the documents. Semi-structured interviews also allowed the researcher to flexibly modify interview questions when necessary in the interview process. When compared to unstructured interviews, semi-

structured interviews also provided certain direction and guidance to make sure the conversation stayed on the general topic of investigation.

I started out by giving a hard copy of participant information sheet and informed consent to interviewees. I briefly introduced the objectives and content of the study with an emphasis on the ethical issues. I then asked interviewees to sign the informed consent and asked their permission for audio recording. Out of the 33 interviewees, four interviewees declined permission to audio record, so I used note taking to record the interviews. Two went off-the-record. Two interviewees asked for a review of what he/she said before publishing and I had done so after writing parts relevant to them.

I started by firstly asking interviewees' involvement and experience with the experiment under research, and then used open-ended questions to solicit information from interviewees. I closed the interviews with some general questions about policy experimentation and state-university relationship in Chinese HE. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours, with several went longer to almost 2 to 3 hours.

Limitation

Given the nature of the research objective and design, the study relied heavily on elite interviewing. Selwny (2013) believed it was key to understand the policy process. Relying on key informants, however, might jeopardise the validity of the data. It was particularly so given the sampling strategy was necessarily non-randomised.

The suspicion of lack of validity about data collected through the interview was not foreign to qualitative researchers. Participants might manufacture their replies (Jaiswal, 2011), or provide limited responses when aware of being interviewed, worried about anonymity, or be inclined to remain consistent with their public images (Powney & Watts, 1987).

There was also a potential power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewees that might affect the quality of interviews. However, it was worth noting that those powerful people were not necessarily more inclined to not telling the truth. As argued by Walford (2011), it was actually relatively easier to tell whether an elite informant was telling the truth by verifying through his past activities and statements.

3.3.2 Documents

Sources

Document analysis is 'a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material' (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). This study used an extensive selection of documents that can be classified into three types.

The first was primary documents, including policy papers, official documents, announcements, commission papers, white papers; important speeches given by relevant leaders; press release; institutional reports and newsletters; program reports; minutes of meetings; correspondence and memoranda, etc. These documents were generally written for informative, record-keeping and/or evaluative purposes. I collected more than 100 documents in this category through official government websites, libraries, newspapers, online database, institutional files (e.g. yearbooks), internet searches and interviewers' personal collection.

Secondary documents could alleviate potential selection and reporting bias embedded in primary sources. This category included two types. The first was scholarly work such as academic papers, books and theses, as well as 'grey literature' such as online publications, conference proceedings and on-going research projects, mainly serving academic purposes. Second was non-academic source such as media coverage (e.g. newspaper articles) and online commentaries, which were generally targeted at a

wider audience. I collected around 200 documents in this category, accessed through libraries, newspapers, institutional files and internet searches. These not only provided background information, but also helped the researcher to identify relevant interviewees.

Tertiary documents referred to bibliographies such as indices to identify potential materials relevant to this study. These could be accessed through libraries and internet searches, which the researcher further utilised in searching for the two abovementioned types of documents.

In selecting documents for analysis, I followed three criteria: (1) Relevance to this study, i.e., to what extent the document can contribute to answering the questions proposed. For example, institutional files documenting other reforms might be valuable in understanding the common approaches of institutional reforms, but was not be used as the main source of this study. (2) Accuracy, authenticity and reliability. It was especially important when there was a counter-fact (such as numbers) or counter-claims of facts by different sources of documents. For example, in the graduate assignment case, there were various claims, such as in different journal articles, regarding the timeline of the reform. The study followed the most authoritative source, i.e., the government document and university yearbook; and further confirmed it with relevant interviewees. (3) Accessibility. The researcher was aware of the fact that some internally circulated documents might not be readily accessible.

Based on the three criteria, the researcher collected an extensive range of documents. For example, one type was official policy papers and government documents, which not only was the most direct form for policy delivery, but also bore a significant signalling effect of the state's intentions in the Chinese context. These could be easily accessed with ensured accuracy and reliability. Since the researcher was the

primary instrument in qualitative inquiries, the evaluation and selection of documents largely relied on the researcher's skills, theoretical stances and intuition (Bowen, 2009).

Compared to interview data, documents could provide a broad range of coverage relevant to questions under investigation and track changes. They also served as an informative account to suggest questions to be asked in interviews and to cross-reference with interviewing data. On the other hand, interview data was more focused and in-depth, allowing the researcher to learn stories 'behind the scene'. With the interview data, the researcher constantly referred back to documents for either verification or corroboration. Through a combination of the two sources, the study sought convergence and corroboration of ideas, themes and patterns generated from different sources of data (Yin, 2009).

Descriptive mapping

The documentary evidence complemented the interview data to present an in-depth account of the four selected cases. There were three common forms of PE used in the Chinese context, i.e., experiment regulation, experiment zone and experiment point. The case studies, however, only focused on experiment point (*shi dian*). So another key exercise this study undertook was to engage with documentary data to provide a descriptive mapping of each method to offer a holistic picture of the developmental trajectory of PE practices in China.

For this purpose, the primary data source used was policy document due to its significant role in China. (Political) documents were the most common way to express official directives of the CPC and governments, in contrast to Constitutions and Laws in the western democracies. In addition, decisions, instructions, opinions, regulations, notices and explanations issued by the Party, the State Council and other ministries all have a law-binding effect (Law, 2002). With reference to official and authoritative

documents, the researcher was able to delineate the use of policy experiments in China (discussed in detail in Section 4.2).

3.3.3 The pilot study, and theoretical and methodological modifications

The researcher conducted a pilot study in 2015 in China, and visited three universities as selected experiment points to conduct preliminary fieldwork. During the pilot, the study collected an extensive range of documentary evidence, and conducted 10 semi-structured interviews.

The pilot provided evidence on the feasibility of this study, especially concerning the access to interviewees and the richness of the available data. The researcher managed to make contact to some key informants involved in the four cases to lay the ground for further contact.

The pilot tested the applicability of different data collection methods, i.e., documents and interviews, to the research questions proposed. It helped the researcher to refine and refocus research questions and interview questions: many interview questions were narrowed down to give a sense of focus on issues of particular interest to this study and to better capture the story behind-the-scene.

It also enabled a re-conceptualisation of previous propositions and theoretical perspectives developed through the literature review, and a more clear-cut research focus, while providing some preliminary findings. In particular, I started out the pilot with an initial distinction of policy experiments, i.e., whether the experiment was initiated and implemented in a top-down or bottom-up approach. During the pilot, I further differentiated it into a four-category typology, and refined the theoretical pathway of an experiment in the policy process. However, at the later stage of the pilot and preliminary data analysis, it became increasingly clear to me that a categorical four-type differentiation could not fully capture the reality. An experiment, from an initiative

to a reform policy, was an iterative and dynamic process that can hardly be described by static features such as top-down or bottom-up. Building on the pilot findings, the study reconsidered its theoretical dimensions in making differentiation among cases and finalised its case selection.

3.3.4 The main study

The researcher completed its main data collection phase in 2016 in China. During the fieldwork, I conducted 23 interviews with university stakeholders from various experiment points, state officials in the MoE, researchers and academics. Information on the 33 interviewees in the two rounds of fieldwork was listed in Appendix IV. I also collected a wide range of documents for further analysis. The interview and document data collection process was covered in the previous two sections.

It was worth noting that the main fieldwork, to an extent, changed the research design and subsequent analysis and presentation. More specifically, in the original design, this study planned to select two universities in each case as experiment points, with equal focus, to enable within case comparison and to provide a more complete picture of each experiment. In practice, such design was proven to be too time-consuming and resource-demanding. More importantly, in certain cases, one university was evidently more intriguing and instrumentally useful in addressing the research questions than the others. Therefore, in the fieldwork, I succeeded to visit two different universities in each case, but I intentionally put more emphasis on one over the other in certain cases. The other institution, therefore, was able to provide a minor comparative element in the final analysis and presentation, but could not constitute a major within-case comparison. This change was both a theoretical and a pragmatic decision. The benefit of doing so was to allow the researcher to best utilise her resources into finding

an in-depth and most representative picture of each experiment, to avoid repeated description of similar events, while being able to provide certain degree of comparison to shed lights on some important issues embedded in each case that may otherwise unable to unveil.

3.4 Data analysis

This section described the data analysis process to demonstrate how findings relevant to the research questions were discovered and derived from collected data.

3.4.1 Document analysis

Document analysis was an iterative process involving 'skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation' (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). This study's document analysis involved two parts.

For one thing, it provided a descriptive data analysis to identify the patterns and trends of PE in all three forms ('experiment regulation', 'experiment zone' and 'experiment point') used in China's HE between 1978-2015. The process involved extracting information from a selected range of documentary sources and making a descriptive analysis of the data. In each type, this study presented the changing numbers, coverage of areas, types and purposes of its use by engaging in numerical and graphic tools. The aim was to complement the in-depth qualitative case study and present a more comprehensive picture of the use and significance of PE in China's higher education.

For another, I used qualitative analysis to repeatedly 'organise information into categories related to the central questions of the research' and recognise patterns 'within the data, with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis' (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). It was fundamentally an iterative process to allow 'continuous meaning-making and progressive focusing' (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 76).

This study regarded documents as being constructed as social facts to serve for specific purposes, under an interpretivist paradigm. Documents sometimes were embedded with unstated meanings and intentions. Therefore, in the documents analysis, I took account of the purposes of authors (intended meanings) and how audiences receive and construct those meanings (received meanings) by making reference to the cultural practices, political configuration and social contexts in China.

The document analysis took place concomitantly with the research process. In particular, it allowed the researcher to identify background information, key events and people of certain experiments. For one thing, it facilitated the researcher to identify key informants as a purposive sampling strategy. For another, the researcher acquired essential knowledge about the state's policies, as well as processes, results and reception of certain experiments to formulate interview questions. It also gave the researcher an opportunity to ask tailered questions to interviewees by citing and presenting documentary evidence. By combining with interview data, the researcher was able to develop themes and patterns to address the research questions proposed (discussed in 3.4.3).

3.4.2 Analysis of interview data

Nvivo and transcription

This study created a case study database to document and organise collected data, including collected evidence and the researcher's field notes and memos (such as records of discussions, chance conversations, observation and reflections) (Rose et al., 2015). The data analysis was facilitated by the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 11. It served as a repository for all collected evidence to facilitate data management. It also organised data in terms of identifying patterns and themes in conjunction with paper-and-pencil coding to maintain both closeness and distance to data. The 'code-to-

theory' model, as proposed by Saldana (2009), started from codes to categories; along with analytical reflections, themes and patterns emerge; at last, the building of thematic relationships led to the construction of theory. Here a code referred to a word or phrase with symbolically assigned meaning being used to capture the content and/or underlying meaning of a portion of text, such as a sentence and paragraph. A category was defined as a cluster of codes with similarity and regularity, as suggested by Saldana (2009). In this study, NVivo not only facilitated the creation of codes and categories, but also allowed the researcher to create a hierarchical relationship among codes and constantly refer and view them in the original text.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed in Chinese entirely by the researcher through repeated careful listening with concomitantly general note taking. The transcribing process, though time-consuming, is believed to be an integral step to closely observe data in a holistic way, get familiar with data, and allocate attention to the important parts of a conversation. Other note-taken interviews were also being transferred to NVivo for integrated data analysis.

Coding strategies

Coding was the 'analytical process through which data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.3). This study took a hybrid approach combing both deductive coding with codes from existing literature and inductive coding with codes developed from raw data. It was an iterative process with the researcher repeatedly engaging with the data with conscious effort in linking data with research questions in order to develop a clear and comprehensive code structure (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Building on the existing literature, the researcher followed the data analysis process detailed in Table 2 (Walford, 2011; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

Table 2 ***Data analysis procedure in this study***

Stage	Description
Descriptive analysis	Describe data in a systematic way by combining deductive coding with inductive coding: assign data to different categories
Thematic analysis (Unit of analysis: an experiment point)	Conceptualise and classify data, find patterns and create typologies, identify themes
	Find associations (among experiences, attitudes, behaviours, contexts, etc.) and seek explanation
Cross-case analysis (Unit of analysis: a policy experiment)	Compare and describe the similarities and divergences between cases; explain those and make propositions
Develop new ideas	Link propositions and generalisations to possible theory building/modification

In the initial phase, transcription of interviews was carefully audited line by line with codes assigned to paragraphs or sentences in the document. The researcher developed initial pre-assigned hierarchical codes with identical coding structure in each case and took account of codes emerging from raw data to constantly adapt and refine the codes and coding structure. The frequency and emphasis of different respondents were taken into account in assigning to codes. The process was repeated: new codes were identified; existing codes were refined, and similar codes were grouped into clusters. Some texts were assigned to more than one code. The researcher strived to maintain the identical feature of coding structure in each case while allowing some unique features in each one.

In a more focused coding, the researcher tried to identify themes and patterns deriving from codes and their content, and arrange them with reference to the three operational research questions, in the hope of finding associations between individual experiences, attitudes, behaviors and contexts to delineate an interpretivist picture of each experiment. These themes were compared, cross-referenced with documents to corroborate and strengthen analysis.

In the process, the researcher consciously referred to the framework proposed by Strivastava and Hopwood (2009) in qualitative data analysis:

- What are the data telling me? (Explicitly engaging with theoretical, subjective, ontological, epistemological, and field understandings)
- What is it I want to know? (According to research objectives, questions, and theoretical points of interest)
- What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know? (Refining the focus and linking back to research questions)

3.4.3 Combining document and interview data

Data generated from interviews was transcribed and treated as texts in data analysis, with transferable techniques in document analysis. More importantly, interview data could offer a richer and more in-depth account of events situated within specific contexts, which went beyond a simple analysis of texts. Compared to 'static' documents, the collected interview data was also a response to assumptions held by the researcher.

Therefore, the study placed more weight on data collected from interviews, while constantly using documentary evidence for verification and corroboration of interview data. In general, the data analysis mainly consisted of two phases: individual case analysis; and cross-case comparison. It was an iterative process with an utilisation of two analytic techniques proposed by Yin (2009): pattern finding and explanation building.

Adapted from Ritchie and Spencer (1994), I used the following questions to guide the data analysis process (Table 3). These guiding questions, combined with an analysis of the document and interview data, allowed the researcher to tentatively develop five themes. Table 4 further presented examples (extracted from the Case IV)

of how certain texts were assigned and located in the hierarchical coding structure. The researcher firstly assigned codes, based on which developed categories and then themes.

Table 3 ***Guiding questions for data analysis***

Categories	Questions
Contextual: identifying the form and nature of what exists	-What is the experiment about and how it is initiated and implemented? -What are people's attitudes or perceptions towards a particular experiment? And towards policy experimentation in general? -What is the nature of the interviewee's experience? And what is his/her main concern? -What is the institutional environment when the experiment occurs? -What is the result of the experiment and related reform on a larger scale?
Diagnostic: examining the reasons for, or causes of, what exists	-What factors contribute to people's attitudes/perceptions? -Why certain decisions are (not) taken? -Why is experiment used in a particular way? -Why have experiments different results? And how to explain them?
Evaluative: appraising the effectiveness of what exists	-To what extent the result of an experiment meets the expectations of different stakeholders? -To what extent state-university interaction influences the result of an experiment? -How does experience influence subsequent behaviours? -What is the role of an experiment in the subsequent reform process?
Strategic: identifying new theories, policies, plans or actions	-How can policy experimentation be improved? -How can institutional settings and environments to be improved to make reforms more effective?

Note. Adapted from Ritchie & Spencer, 1994.

Initiation was the first theme developed from interview and document data. The focus was on how and why a certain experiment was initiated, what were the rationales behind the actions of the involved institution and/or state agencies, including why PE was selected as a form of reform.

Interpretation, as the second theme, addressed how stakeholders in HEIs develop institutionally, culturally and historically situated interpretation of the relevant experiment and their roles within it. Based on the interpretation, the universities as experiment points started to implement innovative changes.

Table 4 ***Sample codes***

Data (Quotes from interview transcripts)	Code	Category	Theme
'The MoE is actually using Bylaws Building as a breaking point to push its reform agenda to build a Modern University system…and to delegate power to the university and even the market'	Reason for the MoE's initiation	Interpretations of rationales for initiation	Initiation
'In the beginning, we were not active. One reason was that there were already many existing regulations, and having bylaws wouldn't fundamentally change the nature of HEIs in China and how they operate...'	University's attitudes towards a state-initiated experiment	Interpretation of university stakeholders	Interpretation
'There were many people involved in the process…numerous revisions…we followed the Regulation published in 2011 but we wanted to add something unique to us….'	Detailed implementing procedure	Account from the university regarding implementation	Implement-ation
'That's the interactive part…for example, we added certain content…and handed the draft to the MoE. The MoE might think it would give us too much power. So it deleted some parts in the revised paper and sent it back. We thought that certain content was really important, so we added it back…the process went back and forth, some of our ideas were kept, some were deleted…so the final product was the result of a game between us and the MoE. There was a balance—maybe the final result was not ideal for us, nor for the MoE, but that's the balance we could achieve in an experiment…'	Description of negotiation	State-university interaction	Interaction
'You have to stand inside the national system to understand its complexities. There is a very effective chain of operation that resides within the system, and policy experimentation is an integral part of it. In fact, the more mature a government is, the less likely for it to have a major reform generated top-down. Most reforms come from the grass-roots—that's the power of policy experimentation.'	Comment on PE (university)	Stakeholders' perception and evaluation	Importance

Implementation was a descriptive theme with detailed accounts provided by interviewees and documents to re-construct the process of implementing a certain experiment with a particular focus on interventions by the state.

Interaction was the fourth theme embedded primarily in previous three phases. The focus was placed on the stance taken by the involved state actors and university

actors, especially the similarities and discrepancies between their attitudes and behaviours in the experiment, and subsequent power negotiations.

Importance, as the last theme, contained codes and categories focusing on the role of policy experiments in the policy process—its results, receptions, and influence on subsequent policies and reforms. Perceptions of different actors, i.e., university stakeholders, state actors and scholars, on policy experimentation and state-university relationship also fell in this theme.

3.4.4 Linking the data to theory and representation of the data

As pointed out by Bleiklie and Kogan (2006), 'we share the ambition to look for explanations, but believe that such explanations need to be socially and historically grounded, i.e. that they have to be specified in time and space' (p. 6). Theoretical perspectives developed in the earlier stage was used as a starting point to facilitate meaningful interpretations 'by identifying similarities and differences between our cases' (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2006, p. 6-7) before exploring patterns in the reform processes. The researcher was aware of the necessity to modify hypotheses and theories with further data, as indicated in the literature (see Walford 2011).

For example, this study adopted the multiple-streams framework as part of the theoretical framework to understand when and how certain initiatives can become a policy. The framework pointed out that only under the following conditions could an issue be included into the national policymaking agenda: the existing of a problem and their advocates (problem stream), a set of policy solutions and their advocates (policy stream), a favorable political situation (politics stream) and the opening of a policy window (Kingdon, 1984). This framework generally fitted with the collected data. However, findings from the data in different cases demonstrated that an opening of a policy window, which was largely a matter of opportunity, might not be necessary. To a

degree, PE could provide a routinised pathway for local experiments to enter national decision-making processes in China, which may triumph over the significance of occasional political events. The data, in turn, modified the previous framework and attracted the researcher's attention to the reflected use of PE as a mechanism to enable higher education reforms.

In presenting the data, this study lent itself to the frequently used technique in qualitative research as thick description, both in terms of case studies and the research process itself.

The researcher should present data in a way that a reader could easily identify the choices made and steps taken in research construction and data collection and analysis, and most of all, the reasons for doing so. Such openness facilitates trust building between the researcher and the readers (Chenail, 1995). At the same time, a thick description of the case by referring, representing and juxtaposition data allowed the researcher to show the richness, breadth and depth of the data, which was at the heart of qualitative research.

3.5 Ethics, validity and limitations

3.5.1 Validity and dependability

By using a set of research strategies and techniques, this study strived to achieve credibility, transferability and dependability.

Credibility (Internal validity)

Qualitative analysis was more interested in the 'face' and 'construct' validity, which could be achieved by 'demonstrating how the concepts and connections we have identified are grounded in the data' (Dey, 1993, p. 264). The ultimate goal of qualitative research was to describe, understand, and construct the event from the perspective of participants. The credibility of this study was achieved through drawing multiple

sources of evidence, establishing chains of evidence, thick description of the event with the support of extracts from the interviews, and confirmability auditing by reexamining original data, interpretations and findings. This study also used cross-case pattern matching to assure the consistency and coherence between data, concepts and findings.

External validity (transferability)

Transferability described the degree to which the findings could be generalised or transferred to other contexts. This research did not aim to produce *statistical generalisation* but *analytic generalisation* (Yin, 2009). In particular, it did not aim to generalise statistical results that could be applied to the entire population; but how selected multi-cases were generalisable to certain theoretical constructs or propositions, with further potential use with regard to similar events. This study could provide useful insights in understanding policy experimentation in China's education context in general with a particular emphasis on state-university interaction and power negotiation in the consensus-building process in higher education reforms.

With this being said, it was also believed that qualitative research could achieve transferability through thick description, by giving a detailed story of the particular event and its situated context to allow readers to make informed decisions about the transferability and applicability of the findings (Walford, 2011). This study also used replication logic to enhance its external validity by using multiple cases with similar structures, and data collection and analysis techniques.

This study applied several types of triangulation and maintains a chain of evidence to construct validity (Denzin, 1970; Zhong, 2005) (see Table 5).

Table 5 ***Types of triangulation in this study***

Triangulation	Description
Methodological triangulation	- For data collection, the same method was used for investigating different institutions and different methods within the same institutions: for example, interviews were used in all selected institutions; within each institution, the researcher engaged in both document research and interviewing; - For data analysis, this research used qualitative analysis and a descriptive mapping analysis.
Data triangulation	Multiple sources of data: for example, in each case, the study drew upon data from interviews and an extensive range of documents such as government papers, institutional files and scholarly works.
Theoretical triangulation	Alternative interpretation and theories were considered.
Space triangulation	Multiple institutions: this study visited various elite universities in four different cities in China.
Triangulation of multiple levels of analysis	Individual, institutional and national: - This study analysed the importance of key individuals, such as the university presidents and state officials; - It focused on interaction at the institutional level, such as universities as experiment points; - This study also explored the role of policy experiments in the policy process and national reforms to expand the analysis to the national level.

Dependability (Reliability)

Dependability, also known as reliability in quantitative research, refers to how reliable the data was to allow repeatability or replication. Though this was difficult to achieve in a primarily qualitative design as this study, the researcher tried to ensure dependability through the following measures as outlined by Yin (2009): gave a full account of theories and ideas relevant to the study; developed, refined and followed a case study protocol; provided context for data collection; ensured proper documentation of data in either electronic or audio format to construct a case study database; and used cross-reference to corroborate findings from multiple data sources.

3.5.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical consideration was an integral part of an academic research project. This research had been reviewed and approved by the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC).

Due to the nature of the research questions, the scarcity of qualified cases, types of interviews (elite interviews) and the purposive sampling strategies, it was impossible to completely eliminate the possibility of selected institution(s) or participant(s) being identified in the final thesis. The participants were aware of such limitation. The researcher made sure that in every step of the research, serious ethical consideration was given to ensure informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality; and the researcher attempted to present the thesis to minimise the chance of an institution or individual being identified. All the institutions and people involved would remain anonymous and/or given pseudonyms.

The researcher sent a participant information sheet containing all essential information relevant to this study and potential risks involved by taking part to all participants agreed to an interview. She gave out hard copies of participant information sheet and informed consent at the beginning of interviews, and acquired their written permission to participation. She also openly and honestly discussed the limitations of anonymisation at the beginning of interviews to make sure that interviewees were aware that while every effort would be made to preserve confidentiality, this could not be fully guaranteed. All participants clearly expressed that they were aware of such limitation; while some of them even proposed to be 'named' in the final thesis. Two interviewees, however, went 'off-the-record'; their interviews were not used in the thesis and their confidentiality is preserved. The researcher also gave all participants the choice to review extracts relevant to their interviews and/or receive a copy of abstract of the final thesis.

A high ethical standard was also achieved through the facilitation of 'self-censorship' (Walford, 2011, p. 4), referring to the fact that the researcher was extremely

careful in interpreting and writing about what was claimed by these powerful people and remains meticulous to maintain confidentiality.

3.5.3 Reflexivity

'All research is researching yourself', claimed by Walford (2001, p. 98). It was almost inevitable for qualitative research to be influenced by their researchers, who constructed the research by leaning on specific theories, methods and resources, constantly interacted with those being researched, and explained the data often by their predetermined set of knowledge and theories (Mruck & Breuer, 2003).

In the research process, the researcher strived to maintain reflexivity at every step of the research process to eliminate the subjective influence on the research.

More specifically, in the research design, the researcher periodically made changes along the progress of the research. For example, after the pilot study, the researcher decided to abandon the previously developed four-type categorisation of policy experiments; during the main fieldwork, the researcher decided to intentionally focus on one university as an experiment point over another. These examples reflected the self-reflexivity of the researcher, and the reasons for those decisions were justified in the previous discussion.

Throughout the research, the researcher maintained a constructive relationship with her supervisors, discussing her decisions and findings with her supervisors to eliminate the potential personal influence on the research design and findings. Also, the research findings and methodological approaches were discussed with assessors in the Transfer of Status and Confirmation of Status. In addition, the researcher used different types of triangulation to minimise potential bias in the data collection and analysis.

3.5.4 Translatability

This research involved two languages: Chinese for data collection and analysis; and English for data analysis and presentation of findings. More specifically, this research made use of both English language documents and Chinese language documents; all interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese. In the initial data analysis, i.e., descriptive analysis and thematic analysis, those data remained in its original form. The translation took place in the later part of the thematic analysis and the writing of this thesis.

The dynamics of language was carefully considered throughout the research to ensure fidelity and transparency of the translation. One reference for translation was the official government websites; meanwhile, the researcher made sure that translations fit with the use of specific terms and concepts in the relevant academic literature. Peer consultation also benefited the process.

3.6 Summary

In this chapter, methodological issues, including the research design, data collection and analysis, as well as ethical and pragmatic matters, were discussed in detail. The researcher believed that methodology mattered—the objective of this chapter was to present an authentic picture of how the researcher made, and in some cases revised, her decisions to conduct this research in a particular way and the rationales behind those decisions. It also hoped to enhance the validity and dependability of this thesis by providing justification of methods used and detailed description of the research design and implementation process.

Chapter 4. Mapping policy experimentation in China's higher education

4.1 Higher education in contemporary China

4.1.1 An overview of higher education in China

The origins of higher learning in China can be traced to ancient times when the China's Han emperors relied heavily on a privileged class of elite literati to advise them on policy and to implement their policy decisions. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and especially the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, China's higher education (HE) has achieved remarkable growth and expansion (Figure 3)[4]. The country is keen to drive HE modernisation to fulfill the social and economic development needs through various reforms.

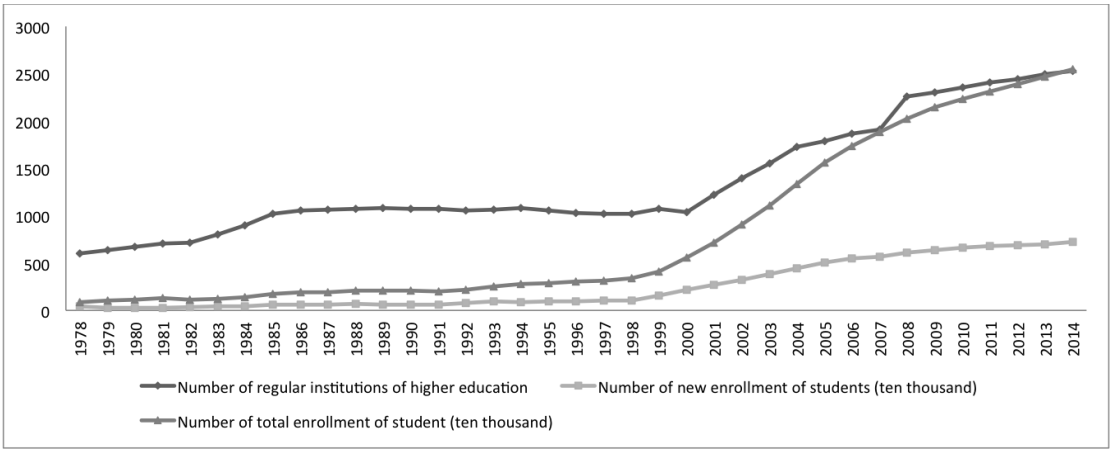


Figure 3 **Higher education expansion in China, 1978-2014 (ten thousand)**

Note. Data refers to general higher education (excluding adult education)
Sources: National Bureau of Statistics of China, accessed 5th June 2015

The expansion and diversification of HE corresponds to changes in the country's economic needs. Policymakers regard education as a priority due to its instrumental value in

[4] Chinese higher education experienced a critical development at the end of the 1990s, featuring a radical expansion of enrolment starting from 1998. From 1998 to 2004, enrollemnt of undergraduates in regular higher education institutions grew by 26.9% per year. During the period from 1998 to 2003, the enrollment of new regular undergraduate students on average grew by about 29.3% annually (for example, from 1998-1999: increased by 48.1%; 1999-2000: increased by 38.1%). In merely five years, the total enrollment of undergraduates in regular HEIs increased from 3.14 million to 11.09 million. Data retrieved from National Statistics Bureau of China.

spurring economic development, providing a qualified labor force, increasing social mobility, reducing inequality and ensuring political stability.

The Reform and Opening up initiative started in late 1970s has brought radical changes to all sectors of China's development. Demands for HE reforms were particularly high due to the previous decade-long Cultural Revolution, which left a devastating imprint on HE: universities were shut down and intellectuals were persecuted. At the time, the then statesman and paramount leader Deng Xiaoping strongly emphasised the development of a modern HE system and the attendant role of science and technology in sustaining rapid economic growth. These needs prompted the restoration of the national college entrance examination (*gao kao*) in 1977. Around the same time, Shenzhen was set up in 1980 as the first economic special zone ('experiment zone') as a testing ground for Reform and Opening-up policy. Under Deng's leadership, policy experimentation (PE) became an increasingly advocated and practiced tool in China's reforms.

In the early 1980s, economic reforms focused on decentralising and empowering local governments by restructuring the economic system and public finance system. At the time, a new educational philosophy was developed that valued independent thinking and freedom (Hannum, Park & Cheng, 2007). It prompted another wave of experimentation to reform education management and finance (Tsang, 2000). In 1985, the publication of *Decision to Reform the Education System* specifically sought multiple sources of financing and power devolution for higher education institutions (HEIs).

Deng's Southern Tour (*nan xun*) in 1992 prompted the development of China's socialist market economy. The increasing demand for a qualified labour force and scientific development invoked another round of higher education reforms geared toward greater marketisation and modernisation. Since 1992, China then engaged in a large-scale

disciplinary restructuring to build more comprehensive universities. This objective was formalised in the *Outline of China's Education Reform and Development* published in 1993 to develop 100 key universities and key disciplines.

In the late 1990s, China started its 'painful economic restructuring of the struggling state-owned enterprise sector' (Hannum et al., 2007, p.17). The development of a market economy and the principle of competition greatly increased the importance of HE in developing highly skilled workers for the labor market. Inevitably, though, the competitive market economy aggravated the imbalanced supply and demand of HE opportunities and increased economic and educational inequality. As a result, there was a period of rapid higher education expansion starting from 1999 (see Figure 3).

In 1998, China demonstrated its ambition to build world-class universities by initiating Project 985. As a result, a two-track HE system—a general route and an elite route—took shape (as discussed in Chapter 3). The top-tier elite universities generally enjoyed more resources, policy preferences and attracted better students. They also bear a significant imprint of national ambitions to sustain rapid economic growth and revitalise the country.

This brief delineation shows that the China's HE development is closely linked to changing economic needs. For this reason, HE reforms need to be understood in their broader economic, social and political contexts.

4.1.2 Higher education reform

Reform can be regarded either as 'conscious, clearly distinguishable attempts at achieving specific goals' or 'embedded processes that form part of more comprehensive social and political processes of change' (Bleiklie et al., 2000, p. 21, 298). Since this view seems most applicable to the Chinese situation, this study regards reform as a combination of

the two. That is, this study takes HE policy as the impetus and cause of changes towards certain desired goals, while those processes also align with a more comprehensive and encompassing interactive processes of political, social, economic and institutional changes. Consequently, the university reform process has unfolded as the result of a set of institutional and social forces often in line with national and international development trajectories. Therefore, university strategically planned changes are usually aimed at addressing disadvantages, dysfunctions or better development within the institution; at the same time, changes within HEIs are influenced by changes in their interrelated economic, social, and political contexts and attendant external circumstances.

From a macro perspective, HE reforms can be understood as expressions or manifestations of idealism, functionalism, rationalism and neo-pluralism. For example, Hood explains British HE reform 'in the context of a neo-pluralist political struggle that is bounded by a shifting ideological context, the burgeoning of bureaucratic power and an acceptance of the relative autonomy of the state' (Tapper, 2007, p. 8). Such grand theories are valid for situating HE into the enveloping social, political and economic circumstances in which they unfold, but they lack the power to account for the dynamic interplay between central and local power, which is a key focus of this study.

From a more meso perspective, such organisational theories as 'open system', 'resource dependency', and 'neo-institutionalism' acknowledge external changes that universities must respond to. It also identifies the unique types of HEI organisational structure: 'loosely coupled system' (Weick, 1976), 'anarchic' structure (Cohen & March, 1986), resistance to change, and bureaucracy-professional dualism (Gumport, 2000). The characteristics of HEIs coupled with the sophisticated politicalisation of universities-within-the-state mark the unique organisational structure of Chinese universities. One of its most

notable and unique features is the Party Committee and its overriding power in university institutional governance. Therefore, university reform can also be viewed as a battlefield where the state's intentions and institutional autonomy interact and negotiate with each other to move modern universities forward. Most of these organisational theories, however, tend to neglect the importance of deliberate changes universities themselves bring about, i.e., local innovative experiments and innovative initiatives.

Finally, from a micro-level perspective, Fullan (1982) articulates a four-phase process of educational change: initiation, implementation, continuation and outcome. Meanwhile, Ely (1990) proposes eight conditions for implementing innovation: dissatisfaction with the status quo, sufficient knowledge and skills, availability of resources, availability of time, reward or incentives, participation, commitment and leadership. Such educational theories may well explain when and where a state decides to implement a policy experiment or whether and why an institution decides to be involved in the process. But these existing educational change theories fail to take into consideration the unique cultural and political contexts that shape university changes as well as the negotiation process between internal and external powers.

As discussed earlier, China's HE reforms are closely related to this wider context of reforms, so this study takes into account and incorporates national contexts and reform themes in its analysis of HE reforms. This study argues that Chinese universities do have the power and will to negotiate with the state, thus shaping the course of HE reforms. One of the mechanisms HE institutions have used is policy experimentation. Table 6 presents a review of Chinese HE reforms and relevant policy experiments. It demonstrates the different phases of development in China's higher education history and the major themes characterised those phases. There is scant scholarly literature, however, which focuses on the objective

examination of the use of PE in HE. This study aims to define that gap and make a fresh attempt at addressing it.

4.1.3 State-university relations and institutional autonomy

This section situates PE in the HE context by providing a brief review of state-university relations and institutional autonomy in general and particularly in China.

In the modern era, nation-states have become increasingly involved in intervening in HE. In fact, HE is regarded, in many national contexts, as a policy sector in which governments could make a difference and a site of 'political conflict involving different social interest groups' (such as in Thomas, 1983; Marginson, 1999; Braun & Merrien, 1999; Kazamias, 2009, p. 162). Higher education reforms are normally the outcome of those conflicts, in which politics remains a visible force.

The state relies on the manpower and technological innovations provided by university practice in pursuit of achieving its long-term productivity and goal of building a knowledge economy. Salter and Tapper (1994) refer to this process as the 'economic ideology of education' (p. 20). Nation states also strive to widen participation in HE, promote social mobility, and transmit its cultural ideology through the practice of the modern universities' educational power. All of these goals are of great political significance. Demands for public accountability are particularly high among critics claiming that the universities lack management competencies, are self-indulgent, inherently inefficient, and irresponsible and irrelevant to social and economic needs. In addition, universities are frequently criticised for failing to contain educational conflicts and for cultivating and showing favoritism to a closed circle of elite professions (Thomas, 1983; Dill & Sporn, 1995; Van der Meulen, 1998; Gallagher, 2001; Ferlie, Musselin & Andresani, 2008). On the other

Table 6 ***Major reforms in the People's Republic of China***

Period	Theme(s)	Reform process	Sample experiments	Influence and implication
1949-1953	Higher education restructuring, including disciplinary changes and merging of universities	- 1949-1950: political orientation for reforms; - 1950-1951: state appointed experiments; - 1952-1953: nationwide restructuring	-Two specially appointed experiment points for 'teaching reform': Renmin University of China and Harbin Institute of Technology -Small-scale experimental restructurings and mergers of a few universities	- Greatly changed the landscape of China's higher education, especially disciplinary arrangements and institutional structures
1966-1976	The Cultural Revolution	- 1966-1977: abolition of the National College Entrance Examinations (*Gao Kao*); - 1966-1969: higher education institutions (HEIs) stopped recruiting students. Many HEIs were closed; - 1968: universities were encouraged to link with social needs in agriculture and industry: 'learning by doing', and to select students from the ranks of workers, peasants, and soldiers to reaffirm the country's position as a socialist state.	None	- Disastrous consequences for Chinese higher education and intellectuals
1979-1989	Granting more autonomy to universities and local governments	- 1979-1985: various institutional initiatives with or without formal central support; - 1985: an education policy paper *Decision on the Reforms of China's Educational System* was issued; - 1985-1989: nationwide comprehensive reforms	- 1979-1983: innovative reforms at four universities to acquire more autonomy (covered in case I of this study) - 1983-1988: the state appointed different universities to experiment in various aspects, such as the 'president responsibility system' in university internal governance structure; and university graduates' recruitment system and employment system (covered in case II of this study)	- HEIs were given greater autonomy and developed to continue to meet the demands of the contemporary higher education through comprehensive changes and reforms
1992-1999	Higher education restructuring;	- 1992-1997: large-scale disciplinary restructuring: 'transfer of jurisdiction',	- Some small-scale pilots were issued in the *Outline of China's Education Reform and*	- Chinese higher education entered the age of

Period	Theme(s)	Reform process	Sample experiments	Influence and implication
	Higher education expansion	'joint construction between the central government and local governments', 'cooperation among institutions' and 'institutional amalgamation' - 1993: an education policy paper *Outline of China's Education Reform and Development* was issued; - 1998: the promulgation of *Higher Education Law;* - 1998: an education policy paper *Action Plan for Invigorating Education in the 21st Century (Action Plan)* was issued; - 1992-1998: Formation of Project 211 and Project 985; - 1998-: Great higher education expansion	*Development (1993)* - *The Action Plan* called for the building of new distance education system, which encouraged an institutional experiment in 1996 (covered in case III of this study)	massification and world-class university building: it reflected the state's endeavour in finding a balance between 'quality' and 'quantity', and 'elite education' and 'mass education' - HEIs' restructuring further devolved power from the central government to local governments and individual universities, and ended the disciplinary and regional disintegrated situation created by the restructuring in the 1950s
2010-2015	Comprehensive higher education reform	- 2010: an education policy paper *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* was issued; - 2010-2015: experimenting phase for certain policies in the *Outline*	- The *Outline* appointed a wide range of experiment points and experiment zones to try out reforms in various areas, such as building a 'modern university system'; - For examples, some institutions were appointed to experiment in internal governance reform, among which establishing Bylaws was the core content (covered in case IV of this study)	- The reform aimed at further power devolution to universities. It focused on more in-depth reforms such as structure and governance, which went beyond disciplines and teaching reforms in the past

hand, universities demand the freedom necessary to pursue truth and academic integrity without political interference (Berdahl, 1990; Halsey, 1992; Kogan & Hanney, 2000).

The resulting tension between 'public accountability' and 'institutional autonomy' presents itself as a form of power negotiation and a protracted struggle between the state and the university, especially when they do not share the same vision or priorities. The state deals with such conflicts by employing new governance strategies such as new intermediary bodies and performance-based funding (Bleiklie et al., 2000; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). In general, there tends to be a shift from interventionist to evaluative governance, from rules to regulation, and from '*ex ante* control to *ex post* performance monitoring' (Enders, de Boer & Weyer, 2013, p. 10). In this sense, universities are constrained to exercise their institutional autonomy within a framework of state-controlled parameters and the managerial functions of funding bodies (Salter & Tapper, 1994).

In this study, 'state-university relations' alludes to the nature of the association and interactions between polity and university. It is important to understand that state-university power relations are far more complex than a top-down flow of authority and power (de Boer, Enders & Shimank, 2008). On the one hand, governments do not invent knowledge but rely on the 'learned man' for his wisdom while carrying out many other priorities besides education. On the other hand, universities actively seek alternative sources of funding and build coalitions of support to reduce their dependency on government while forming policy networks to influence the state. Herein lies the possibility for bottom-up PE initiated by local institutions.

The dynamics in the evolution of state-university relations can be roughly divided into three phases. The first phase is *relative independence* in which the university is a self-sustaining institution with minimal state intervention. The second is

state control in which the university relies heavily on state funding. The last is '*decentralised centralisation*' (Mok, 2002) in which the state takes a more regulative role instead of direct intervention by using strategies such as establishing new intermediary bodies.

Scholarship generally regards China's universities as operating in a highly political environment in an authoritarian state (such as in Zha & Hayhoe, 2014). This study argues that this is not always the case. More importantly, HEIs have multiple layers of governance. Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988) have stressed the importance of understanding the dispersal of power between the central and local governments. In reality, different levels of government may have differentiated interests, perceptions and value judgments. Therefore, sometimes a municipal/provincial government may hold a different attitude towards initiatives in the university within its region from the central government. It is possible for the local government to form an advocacy coalition with the university in pursuit of regional development. Alternatively, the local government may intervene too much into the discretionary experiment unit. Sometimes local governments are not compliant with central government policies, especially when these are equivocal policy statements and contradict local interests (Wu, 1995).

To make things more complicated, China's governance is subject to both the vertical hierarchy between the central ministries and local ministries, which is based on functional departments (referred to as *Tiao*) and the horizontal span of management between localities (regional government) based on local needs (referred to as *Kuai*). The degree of *tiao-kuai* integration is high and sometimes causes undesirable conflicts. For example, the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education is subject to both the Ministry of Education and the Beijing municipal government. Therefore, it is important to take account of multiply layers of stakeholders to understand the state-university

relationship in China.

Central government (the State Council and various ministries) and elite universities

The chief administrative authority of the People's Republic of China is the State Council. It is synonymous with the Central Government. Led by the Premier and Vice-Premiers, it currently comprises 25 cabinet-level departments. Among them, there are 20 ministries, including the Ministry of Education (MoE).

The Ministry of Education, established in 1949, regulates and oversees all aspects of education in China. It was renamed the State Education Commission (SEC) from 1985 to 1998. Hence, for the discussion of this period, I refer to it as the 'State Education Commission'. A selected group of public universities are under the direct administration of the MoE and other ministries as national universities to differentiate them from regional universities (including public universities administered by the provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities). These national universities are expected to be at the forefront in exploring higher education reforms.

China initiated Project 985 in 1998 to build a core group of world-class elite universities. The initiative currently comprises 39 universities (Ministry of Education, 2011, Dec). Among them, there are 31 key national universities referred to as 'universities regulated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China' (*zhong guan gao xiao*). They are administered by the MoE, but they stand apart since their presidents and party secretaries are appointed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Organization Department of the CPC. These universities are also referred to as 'vice-ministerial level' universities because they are given the same ranking as government vice-ministries. All universities selected as sub-cases in this study are key national universities.

Local governments and elite universities

In this study, 'local government(s)' refers to the provincial and municipal governments and their respective Commissions of Education. Since the national universities are directly administered by state ministries, the role of local government in the governance of elite universities is less significant. The differences in local economy and leadership, however, influence the development of universities, especially in terms of financial support and provision of resources.

The political configuration and higher education governance system can be referred to as '*ti zhi*' (literally translated as system) – 'an overpowering political structure and social system' (Tenzin, 2017, p. 3). University leaders (presidents, party secretaries, heads of departments and faculties) are included in the nation-state's hierarchical system with their status tied to the administrative ranking system – for example, the president of a key national university carries an administrative ranking equal to the vice-governor of a province. As embodied in *ti zhi*, hierarchical social relations and power configurations shape the perception and behavior of Chinese academics. This state of affairs implies that there might be among stakeholders different understandings and connotations of 'autonomy'. In Western scholarship, 'institutional autonomy' refers to the power the university exercises to govern itself without external control or interference—i.e. institutional independence, self-governance and academic freedom completely free from state control (Berdahl, Altbach & Gumport, 2005). But 'institutional autonomy' in China is often translated as '*zi zhu*', which more precisely refers to 'self-mastery'— being able to initiate its own agenda while supporting the state (Hayhoe & Liu, 2010). Pan (2009) points out that China's universities and scholars are quite comfortable with the idea of 'semi-dependence', being neither distinctively separate from the state nor completely under its control. The balance between

individualism and collectivism (Halstead & Zhu, 2009) echoes Zha's (2012) argument that the perceived aim of Chinese scholars is to actively seek 'a high level of articulation between their academic pursuits and the national interest' (p. 209). It might be better understood as a kind of 'obedient autonomy' – 'a self-directed control over change that takes effect only through the concerted effort to achieve and maintain a discourse of order and immutability' (Evasdottir, 2004, x). These differing understandings and connotations of 'autonomy' make the Chinese HE case theoretically and practically intriguing.

In a certain sense, this study regards HE reforms since 1978 as a university quest for more autonomy and better governance from the state. The most significant case is the universities' appeal for more autonomy and voluntary attempts for reforms in this aspect in the early 1980s. On the other side of story, the state is trying to devolve more power and authority to HEIs, mostly for the sake of the diversification of financial sources, though some scholars believe that these measures are limited in operational autonomy, far from substantial self-steering capabilities. Whitley and Gläser (2014) argue that while states are granting universities more strategic autonomy by making them more competitive organisations in pseudo-markets, they also attempt to direct universities' practices towards public policy objectives.

One of the most important and distinctive ways that the Chinese government uses to extend its influence to HE is the dual structure of university governance, i.e., the coexistence of the administrative structure and the Party Committee. The organisational structure shown in Table 7 provides a general idea of how a university functions under this dual structure in everyday operation. Currently, the *Higher Education Law* (1998) mandates that in HEIs, 'the presidents take over-all responsibility under the leadership of the primary committees of the Communist Party of China' (Article 39).

Table 7 ***The Dual Governance Structure of China's public universities***

The Party System	The Administrative System
- Head: Party Committee Secretary Vice Party Committee secretaries - Teaching units: departmental party branches - Functional units: organisation, discipline, propaganda, etc. - Objective and role: to guarantee the university operates in a socialist orientation and in compliance with the Chinese Communist Party's principles and policies	- Head: President Vice presidents - Teaching units: departments and research institutes - Functional units: personnel, international cooperation, finance, students, etc. - Service units: libraries, publishers, logistics management - Objective and role: to supervise the university's everyday operation

Note. Adapted from Wang, 2014, p. 60

The governance system has gone through some significant changes since the early 1980s and remained the 'presidential responsibility system under the leadership of the Party Committee' since 1989. In the current system, the two governance structures 'exercise their functions and powers independently and responsibly' (*Higher Education Law*, 1998, Article 39). With the president as leader, the administrative system plays a more critical role in the university's everyday operations. Meanwhile, the existence of the Party Committee guarantees the university operates from a state-sponsored socialist orientation and in compliance with the CPC's principles and policies (*Higher Education Law*, 1998, Article 41). Their respective responsibilities and domains of power, however, are ambiguously defined. As a result, their functions occasionally overlap, and sometimes the universities' affairs are subject to the state's standards of political correctness. Yet, together the two parts form the university's central leadership.

4.2 Mapping policy experimentation: Three types

4.2.1 Overview

The three most frequently used forms of policy experimentation in China are referred to as 'experiment regulation' (*shi xing tiao li*), 'experiment zones' (*shi yan qu*) and 'experiment points' (*shi dian*). This section provides a descriptive overview of the use of each method to offer a holistic picture of the developmental trajectory of policy

experimentation in China's higher education and provide a context for further in-depth case studies. The primary data sources used here are significant policy documents, laws and regulations, and media reports.

Policy documents are the most common way for the CPC and various levels of government to express official directives. In China, policy documents play the same significant role that constitutions and laws play in western democracies. These official documents reflect the consensus of a group of leaders and bear legitimacy and authority, both symbolically and administratively. Wu (1995, p. 24) refers to this phenomenon as 'documentary politics'. This term captures the essence of routine politics in China as 'rule by documents' in contrast to 'rule by law'. By making reference to these official, authoritative documents, the study delineates the use of the various forms of PE identified above as applied in China. In this section, the term 'documents' (*wen jian*) is used in a narrow sense, to refer to the 'official paperwork produced by governing bodies' as distinguished from nongovernmental documents (Wu, 1995, p. 25).

In China, though newspapers are not official documents, they 'are the most useful tool for party propaganda and agitation work' (Hsiao & Cheek, 1995, p. 77). *The People's Daily* (*ren min ri bao*) is the CCP Central Committee's leading official media outlet.

Meanwhile, the *Wanfang Data: Policies and Laws of China (PLOC)* is the most comprehensive database for China's policies and laws. The study uses this database to access information regarding China's policies, regulations and laws at both the national and regional levels for the focused time frame from 1978 to 2015 (inclusive).

Due to the above considerations, the data used in this chapter has been mapped and selected from the following sources:

- Government annual reports issued by the State Council (from 1978-2015);
- The Ministry of Education's annual plans (from 1987-2015);

- *People's Daily* (*ren min ri bao*);
- Policy experimentation related regulations, ordinances and stipulations accessed through *Wanfang Data: Policies and Laws of China* (*PLOC*)

4.2.2 The use of 'experiment regulation'

'Experiment regulation' here refers to provisional rules made for pilot project implementation (Heilmann, 2008a). Through a thorough *PLOC* search, I have been able to identify three types of regulations for analysis: titles with 'provisional' (*shi xing* or *zan xing*) or titles with 'experimental' (*shi yan*) or as 'regulating experiment points' (*shi dian*) and 'experiment zones' (*shi yan qu*). These regulations include administrative regulations or ordinances, laws and judicial interpretations, and ministerial regulations. Other types of regulations, such as regional regulations, are not included.

Through a keyword research, the majority of documents fall into the category are ministerial regulations. For example, in 2015, there were 642 ministerial regulations issued, but only 20 administrative regulations and 15 laws and judicial interpretations. Therefore, the total number presented primarily reflects ministerial regulations. This same pattern applies to the education sector when the search was narrowed down (in particular, there were no documents that fall into the 'laws and judicial interpretations' category in the education sector). The use of experiment regulations from all categories regarding higher education between 1978 and 2015 is shown in Figure 4.

For 1978, I retrieved a total of 30 experiment regulations. The annual number increased greatly until the mid-1980s with a high of 375 in 1987. Though the number fluctuated after 1987, it continues to reflect an upward trend with a high of 677 occurrences reached in 2015. This trend corresponds with the period when China was actively engaging in reforms in which the experimental approach was highly regarded as a 'trial and error' mechanism managed and regulated by the issuance of official documents.

In the education sector, there was no significant increase, but the pattern shows cyclical fluctuations in the use of experiment regulations with a peak of 52 experiment regulations published in 2007. Education-related regulation with experimental status generally constitutes around 3%-9% of the total regulations of similar nature. The peak of 12% occurred in 1979, the year right after the official inauguration of the Reform and Opening-up when various education-related reforms were also introduced.

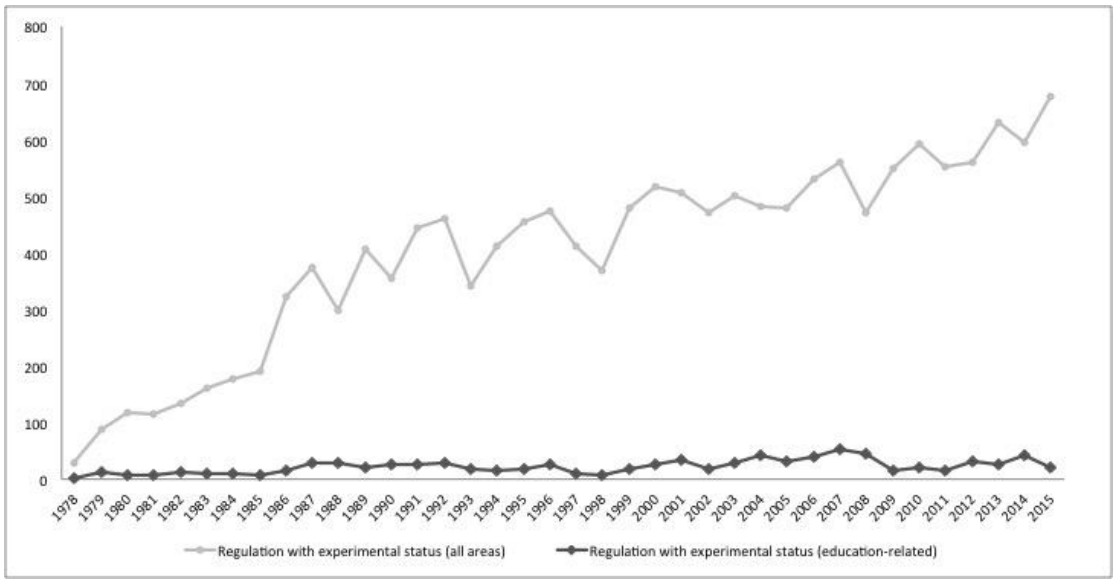


Figure 4 **Number of experiment regulations used in all areas and in education respectively in China (1978-2015)**
Source: Wanfang Data: Policies and Laws of China. Retrieved from http://c.g.wanfangdata.com.cn/Claw.aspx, accessed 9th January 2017

The higher share of education related experiment regulations is seen at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s and the mid-2000s. These spikes in publication correspond to the pre-publication and post-publication of a number of important education policy papers, including *The Decision to Reform the Education System* (1985), *Outline for China's Education Reform and Development (1993),* and *An Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 (2010).* It might be the case that these policy papers represented an accrual of the educational (experimental) reforms that had been on-going from earlier periods,

but it might also be the case that these policy papers were directives calling for further experimental initiatives to drive additional reforms.

4.2.3 The use of 'experiment zone' and 'experiment point'

Here 'experiment zone' (*shi yan qu*) refers to the local jurisdictions being granted broad discretionary powers endowed by the central authorities to engage in innovative activities and measures that may embrace diverse policy sectors (Heilmann, 2008a; Zhou, 2011). The most well-known experiment zones were the Special Economic Zones of Shenzhen, Xiamen, Shantou and Zhuhai established in the late 1970s and early 1980s to serve as laboratories for unprecedented innovative and unorthodox reforms as an integral part of the Reform and Opening-up policy. In the HE sector, the most active region is Shanghai, which is constantly put at the frontline for educational reform efforts. For example, in 2010, the MoE appointed Shanghai as the national experiment zone for comprehensive education reform (*People's Daily*, 2010).

'Experiment point' (*shi dian*) refers to units or institutions in which pilot projects and model demonstrations were initiated in a specific policy domain. As Heilemann called it, 'experiment point' was 'an indigenous neologism introduced by the Chinese Communists' (2008b, p.11).

This section examines the use of these neologisms 'experiment zone' (*shi yan qu*) and 'experiment point' (*shi dian*) in the *People's Daily* between 1978 and 2012. Through keyword search and manual screening, the results captured included 78 reports relevant to education generally and 39 reports relevant specifically to higher education from a total of 1911 occurrences. A peak occurred in 2004 with nine articles published relevant to experimental reforms in education. Among them, six articles discussed 'modern distance education'. Another peak was achieved in 2010 when there were 11 articles relevant to 'experiment points' in education. The publication of the *Outline of*

China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 in that year fuelled the government discourse for advocating a further expansion in experiments.

I further examined the use of 'experiment point' (*shi dian*), 'experiment zone' (*shi yan qu*) and 'experimentation'/ 'experiment' (*shi yan)* in China's annual government reports issued by the State Council. Between 1978 and 2015, experimental related terms were mentioned 237 times in different contexts – sometimes PE is used as a reform methodology that the government advocates, but other times it is used to signal reform in a specific area (see Table 8 for a detailed breakdown). Together, it demonstrates the prevalent use of PE in official government reports of reform.

Table 8 ***Usgae of experimentation related terms in China's Annual Government Reports (1978-2015)***

	PE as reform methodology	Economic reforms	Social reforms	Educational Reforms	Political reforms	Cultural and technological reforms
Frequency	10	134	77	8	4	4
First used	1982	1979	1989	1984	1982	2006

Source: Annual Government Reports. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2006-02/16/content_2616810.htm, accessed 11th January 2016.

Table 8 clearly shows that, during this period, the government's policy priority was economic reform, while the relevant references to education was used eight times. Their usage is listed in Table 9, which shows that 'experiment point' (*shi dian*) was a more prevalently used methodology in the education sector given the existence of individual schools and universities (in comparison, the economic sector was normally developed on a more regional scale).

Table 9 ***Usage of experimentation related terms in education in China's Annual Government Reports (1978-2015)***

1984	In recent years, education and research areas have engaged in certain good explorations and ***experimentation (shi yan)***. Universities such as Suwen University's management reform…
1989	We should meticulously conduct the comprehensive reform **experimentation *(shi yan)*** of higher education, continue the disciplinary restructuring to enhance the adaptability of disciplines, and improve the supply-meets-demand, mutual-selection university graduate employment assignment system.
1992	Further promote comprehensive reform in rural areas and **'experiment point' (*shi dian*)** work for comprehensive reform in urban area.
2000	…At the same time, conduct reform **'experiment point' (*shi dian*)** work of public welfare scientific and research institutions.
2004	…increase financial support to rural education, primarily in areas of teachers' stipend, basic education infrastructure, '**experiment point' (*shi dian*)** work for modern distance education in basic education and student aid for disadvantageous students.
2008	From 2007, we started to conduct '**experiment point' (*shi dian*)** work in normal universities directly administered by the Ministry of Education, providing free education to students who will become teachers after graduation.
2010	Start the initiatives of the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development*, focusing on five particular areas: first, to continue education reforms. We should emancipate our minds, be innovative and encourage **experimentation *(shi yan)***, in order to conduct comprehensive reforms in systems, teaching content, teaching methods and assessment system.
2012	Improve teacher training in basic education and expand the '**experiment point' (*shi dian*)** work of 'professional rank and title system' reform.

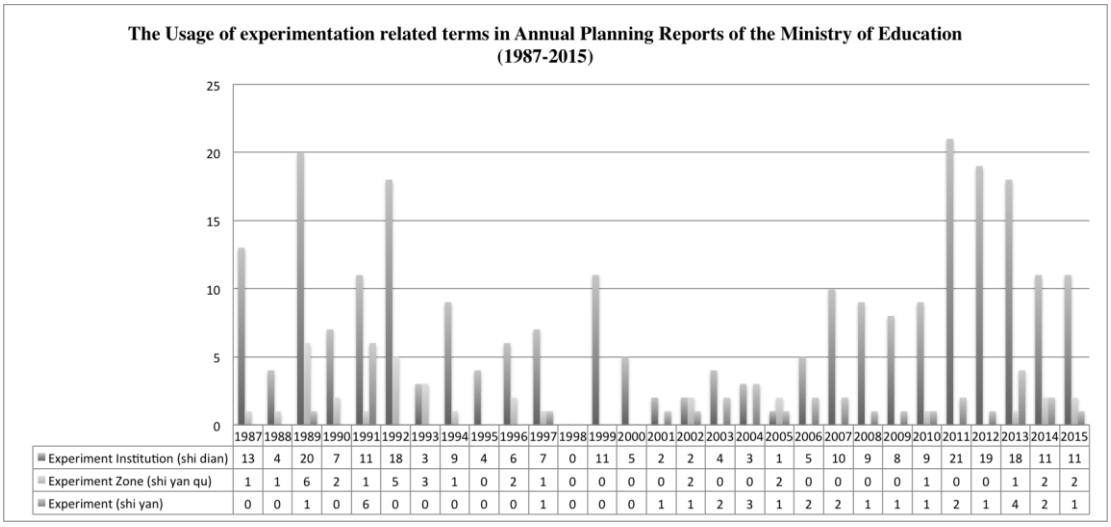
Source: Annual Government Reports. Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2006-02/16/content_2616810.htm, accessed 11th January 2016.

I used a similar approach and methodology to analyze the occurrence of the same keywords (*shi yan; shi dian; shi yan qu*) in the Ministry of Education's annual planning reports (only available from 1987-1997; 1999-2015). The results of the analysis clearly demonstrate the frequent appearance of those terms in the rhetoric (Figure 5). The MoE's annual planning reports were published in the beginning of each year to be distributed to the relevant bureaus and offices in each province and municipality and MoE administered universities. It signposts the MoE's plan of the year and provides guidelines for local governments and relevant universities to follow.

The first peak in this instance roughly corresponds to the trend toward 'experiment regulation' seen at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Another peak appears between 2011 and 2013, probably due to the publication of the

Outline, which explicitly called for further experimental reforms in various aspects of education.

Figure 5 demonstrates, first, the various education reforms taking place in contemporary China utilising the experimental approach, as shown in the prevalent occurrence of PE related terms in those widely distributed MoE planning papers. It is particularly so given that China was then and is still now a nation-state governed by the 'rule-of-documents'. The usage of PE encompasses various areas, from basic education to tertiary education, from rural education to urban education, from adult education to distance education.



	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Experiment Institution (shi dian)	13	4	20	7	11	18	3	9	4	6	7	0	11	5	2	2	4	3	1	5	10	9	8	9	21	19	18	11	11
Experiment Zone (shi yan qu)	1	1	6	2	1	5	3	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	2
Experiment (shi yan)	0	0	1	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	3	1	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	4	2	1

Figure 5 **Usage of experimentation related terms in Annual Planning Reports of the Ministry of Education (1987-2015)**
Note. I manually selected these numbers based on my semantic interpretation of whether 'experiment point', 'experiment zone', or 'experimentation' was the more appropriate generic or methodological term. In certain places, the Chinese term '*shi yan*' was used (referring to other activities such as 'laboratories'), but those are not included in my analysis.
Source: Ministry of Education official website. Retrieved from http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_164/index.html, accessed 11th January 2016

In the official documents, the use of these experiment-related terms were used in various ways. Sometimes they indicate the initiation or expansion of certain reforms concerning a particular education sector using either the 'experiment point' approach or

the ‘experiment zone’ approach. The use of these terms, interestingly, can be viewed also as a characteristic Chinese way of ‘scientification’– i.e. validation through experimentation. For example, in the 1989 annual planning report, it states, ‘we should continue the experimental work of comprehensive reforms in rural education. Based on the three existing experiment zones, the State Education Commission should work with the provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities to build experiment zones. We aim to build experiment zones in 100 counties by the end of this year’ (Item 2). As another example, the 2011 annual planning report called for the initiation of an ‘experiment point’ regarding the launching of an Open University as part of the country’s lifelong learning initiative.

Sometimes this experiment related terminology was used without implying substantial reforms at all but as a way to push for the staged, gradual expansion of certain changes. For example, the 1987 annual planning report called for the creation of an ‘experiment point’ for work regarding the military training of university and high school students. In fact, by then, there were already certain regions which were implementing ‘military training’ for university students. Later in 1991, the annual planning report stated that it would further expand this ‘experiment point’ work regarding military training for university and high school students. In this case, this particular experiment was used in a methodological sense for reform implementation.

4.3 Summary

The chapter presented a detailed description of the contextual considerations which need to be kept in mind when addressing HE issues in the unique context of contemporary China (1978-) and offers a descriptive picture of the development trajectories of PE in China.

First, this section established the close connection of higher education with

economic development and China's broader socio-political context. This section also showed how the existing HE governance system shapes university actors' characteristic ways of thinking and behaving. As the analysis has shown, university practitioners and academics in China have developed a unique way of articulating their interests and understanding in their interactions with the state.

The second part of this section provided a descriptive analysis of the use of three forms of PE—i.e., 'experiment regulation', 'experiment zone' and 'experiment point'—in the Chinese context. The section described the meanings in these three forms based on document analysis of how frequently these experiment-related terms are used and how their meanings have evolved with their expanded usage.

The analysis also briefly discussed how these frequency and usage trends corresponded to the broader changes that were simultaneously happening over that period in China and highlighted the prevalent usage of the rhetoric of this experimental approach in the government's officially published documents. In the education sector, the analysis revealed that the usage of 'experiment point' was most frequent. It is a major reason why this study primarily focuses on these 'experiment points' in the case studies to explore the proposed research questions (see Chapters 5 to 8). In addition, this analysis of rhetoric and usage revealed how the state discourse intentionally differentiated its usage of experimentation related terms over time to change the signals that it wanted to send to the various entities in the education sector. The state sometimes used this rhetoric tacitly to authorise and to promote the continued or expanded use of a locally generated experiment, while at other times the government used its PE rhetoric as scientifically stylised manner for pushing its articulation of pre-conceived changes or hidden agenda. Therefore, it is interesting to further explore the implications of these variations in PE in China's policymaking and higher education reform process.

Chapter 5. Case I: Seeking institutional autonomy through a management reform

5.1 Introduction

There is a plethora of literature discussing the economic, social, cultural and educational reforms introduced in the People's Republic of China after the Reform and Opening-up that was initiated by Deng Xiaoping and China's Communist Party (CPC) in 1978. The decade-long Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) had been disastrous for modern China in general and especially for higher education (HE). During the Cultural Revolution, the universities had been shut down and the National College Entrance Exam (*gao kao*) had been abolished. In a chaotic context of xenophobia and anti-intellectualism, intellectuals were persecuted and shamed, especially those who had been considered tainted by Western influences. Therefore, many aspects of higher education that we might take for granted today needed to be rebuilt from scratch in the late 1970s. There were many obstacles that might seem trivial today which needed to be overcome, often at great expense and effort, at the beginning of the reform era.

After CPC Chairman Mao Zedong's death, Deng Xiaoping assumed the Mao's role as a paramount leader and statesman until 1992, though he never held office officially as the government's or Party's leader. Deng's market-oriented economic reforms had a comprehensive and far-reaching impact on China. Deng made radical changes in China's policies and direction. He favoured a course of pragmatic leadership fuelled by major reforms and experimentation. His pervasive influence left a strong imprint on the post-1978 era.

In August 1979, with the CPC's approval, the Ministry of Education (MoE) re-published the *Decision on Strengthening the Unitary Leadership and Classified Management of Higher Education Institutions*. Originally published in 1963 but abrogated during the Cultural Revolution, this document focused on defining the

relationship between the central and local governments. Based on the re-invocation of this lapsed document, the central government began to take back much of the power and many of the functions which it had relinquished to the provincial/municipal governments directly under the central government's control in order to re-establish its authority and re-assert its unitary leadership over China's HE and university network.

The government's centralised educational system, however, could not meet the desire of higher education institutions (HEIs) for reform and increasing needs and demands for human resources. Moreover, the rapid expansion of the higher education sector led to an increasing shortfall in education funding and emerging problems concerning graduate employment (Yin, 1993).

Against this background, several leaders of elite universities[5] jointly published an article in 1979 to request a certain degree of institutional autonomy for China's universities. Published in the *People's Daily* (*ren min ri bao*), the Party's official newspaper, the article, with editorial commentary, asked 'whether universities deserve some autonomy; if so, what kinds of autonomy?' (*People's Daily*, 1979, Dec 6). The article precipitated a heated debate in the tertiary education sector and from the general public and provoked a wave of discussion on HE reform in China featuring the universities' proactive search for institutional autonomy. In the context of this prolonged debate, the word 'autonomy' referred to the ability of the university to define and implement its own self-directed 'decision-making power within the institution'.

With the universities' elite intellectuals actively 'pitching' the idea of increased autonomy to the central government (and with strong public support), some universities took the initiative to launch a set of experimental strategies within their institutions

[5] They were the then President of Fudan University Su Buqing, the then President of Tongji University Li Guohao, the then President of Shanghai Normal University (now East China Normal University) Liu Fonian, and the then Party Secretary of Shanghai Jiao Tong University Deng Xuchu. Interesting to note, all four universities were located in Shanghai.

while negotiating with the state for increased power and autonomy. Among all the universities' efforts in the period, Suwen University 'managed to capture and hold the national spotlight in a more compelling way than any other higher education institution' (Hayhoe, 1989, p. 67).

This chapter explores a management reform undertaken by Suwen University (pseudonym), and how Suwen's initiative started a wave of changes featuring HEIs seeking institutional autonomy (5.2). The chapter also discusses Wantong University's (pseudonym) efforts in this era of great change. Wantong's reform measures differed materially from those initiated by Suwen and focused mainly on teaching reform, but the intentions and motivation behind those attempts are similar (5.3.1). Section 5.3.2 analyses and discusses factors influencing the outcomes of those initiatives discussed.

The interviewees who are relevant to this case, their positions and designated code in this chapter can be referred to in Appendix IV. The documents relevant to this case include both primary documents, such as university yearbooks and government papers, and secondary literature, such as bibliographies of key players, media report and scholarly work (see references).

5.2 Suwen University's institutional management reform initiative

Suwen University is an elite educational institution in one of the major metropolis (City S) in the southern China. It was under the direct administration of the Ministry of M due to its disciplinary and industrial linkage until 1982. In 1983, it became a university directly administered by the MoE. City S reports directly to the central government. Its status equals to that of a province. Therefore, as a jurisdiction, the local government enjoys the same power and authority as a provincial government.

This chapter discusses the reform measures strategically designed and implemented by Suwen University between 1978 and 1984 and highlights how Suwen

was able to succeed in developing those often controversial experimental strategies. It also touches on the catalytic role played by some prominent national leaders in the implementation and expansion phases of what was perceived at the time as a grassroots-level, bottom-up reform initiative.

5.2.1 Implementation: A management reform

At the heart of Suwen's reform initiative was its strategic choice to introduce changes to its institutional management system. After the Cultural Revolution, China implemented a strict centrally planned economy. The CPC, through its central government apparatus, exercised absolute control over all aspects of resource allocation, including the university graduate employment assignment system and what became known as the 'Iron Rice Bowl' (*Tie Fan Wan*)[6] system, which 'guaranteed' job security. At the time, the government promulgated the guiding principles of egalitarianism and anti-competition. The application of these principles made university practices highly inefficient and rigid. This section discusses those experimental measures concerning institutional management reform introduced by Suwen at the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up. As many decision makers observed in hindsight, these institutional management reforms themselves constituted a revolution.

Material incentives: Introduce bonus, subsidy, and scaled salary

In 1979, Suwen University proposed the introduction of a bonus system as its first step in trying to break the traditional 'One Big Pot' system (*Da Guo Fan*[7]) (Suwen University Party Secretary Office, 1984). The *Da Guo Fan* system was based on excessive egalitarianism: it insisted that everyone was to be treated equally. But it

[6] 'Iron Rice Bowl' (*Tie Fan Wan*) refers to the situation in China under the planned economy in which an employee could not be fired based on his/her performance and, consequently, discouraged individual effort, initiative and productivity.

[7] The 'One Big Pot' system (*Da Guo Fan*) literally means that everyone 'eats' from the same big pot. It refers to a system when everyone was treated equally and was paid the same salary irrespective of workload and efficiency.

quickly became clear that this radically egalitarian approach was becoming increasingly unsustainable and inefficient. It was fundamentally contradictory to the principles of the new Reform and Opening-up initiative.

Introducing a bonus system, however, was politically sensitive, due to its use of material incentives and its encouragement of 'unequal treatment'. The university persistently reported its proposals, particularly regarding issues of costs and regulations, to its administrative authority, i.e., the Ministry M and local government officials (Wang, 2016, p. 53). Eventually, on the 19th September 1979, Ministry M approved Suwen's proposal to 'experiment implementing a bonus system' (Suwen University Archive, 1979, Sep 19). Soon thereafter, the local government also approved Suwen's request and further appointed two other universities in its jurisdiction to try out the use of bonus incentives in universities, but the local government also set a limit on incentives to ￥72 per person per year (Wang, 1996; Suwen University History Committee, 2006)[8] in the experiment. After receiving the approvals, Suwen started to implement its bonus system. The bonus itself was scaled, based on performance.

The bonus system targeted a small portion of Suwen's academics with incentives to encourage their increased productivity. To enhance the treatment of the university's academics, Suwen further introduced a system of quality of life subsidies for teachers and university leaders who were being particularly squeezed by low salaries amidst rising costs. This strategy dictated a break with the traditional *Da Guo Fan* system. To acquire support, Suwen filed reports, repeatedly, to the Ministry M and local government authorities. In October 1981, various local government branches expressed their support for the subsidies initiative in principle. In February 1982, the Ministry M

[8] In 1978, the net income per capita in China is ￥133.6. (Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, http://www.stats.gov.cn/ztjc/ztfx/jnggkf30n/200810/t20081031_65691.html, accessed 2017/07/03)

formally expressed its support. Later, the local government further discussed Suwen's proposal until it allowed Suwen to 'experiment with subsidies based on posts/positions' in September 1982 (Suwen University Archive, 1982, Sep 6).

Emboldened by the approvals, Suwen's leadership decided to push for further reforms. In 1983, it pioneered a scaled salary reform, linking academics' salaries (the distribution system), professional titles (the personnel system) and workload (the labour system) together. Previously, these systems had been administratively separate and static (i.e. treating everyone the same). These negotiations were complex and prolonged. The university's leaders were involved constantly in contentious bargaining and interactions with the Ministry's and local government's administrative authorities. In addition, the university's leaders had to find new, strategic sources of funding to pay for its proposed reforms.

In 1982, Suwen started to explore ways to restructure its salary system on the basis of the results their previous reforms had achieved. The university submitted an appeal to conduct further experiments to its local government and the MoE in 1983. In 12th March 1983, the MoE officially designated Suwen as an experiment point to try out salary reform. It was also later approved by the local government (Suwen University History Committee, 2006). An important reason for Suwen being allowed to undertake these reforms was its slogan 'Self-funded Salary Reform'. A3 held a leadership position at Suwen during these tumultuous times. As he reflected on the difficulties of implementation, 'It was almost intuitive for everyone to assume that salary reform was simply a process of increasing salaries, but how much and from where?' The university leadership achieved the extra resources from increased management efficiency and external financial support.

Even before its actual implementation in 1983, the Ministry of Personnel had explicitly told Suwen that though this experimental measure was approved, 'it would not be expanded to other universities for the moment.' (Suwen University Archive, 1983, March 16). Later in 1984, the state praised Suwen's efforts in solving certain problems in the then salary system. The state further emphasised that Suwen was the only experiment point which had official approval to reform the salary system, though other institutions had appealed to the state to undertake similar reform efforts (Suwen University Archive, 1984, Jan 25).

In fact, soon after Suwen's reform efforts, the state started a nationwide reform of salary scales in all state-owned institutions. Suwen wisely adjusted its standard to the state's standard, and hence received public funds to support its reforms. The university further adjusted its scale to a pre-designed institutional standard and introduced a promotion system in which an academic's salary and promotions were based on performance rather than length of service. These measures specifically targeted middle-aged academics (Suwen University Archive, 1983, May 28), whose careers had been most severely impacted by the decade long interruption introduced by the Cultural Revolution. Until 1990, Suwen went through several rounds of salary adjustments, but then in 1990, there was a national salary reform which incorporated Suwen's institutional standard.

Altogether, introducing differentiated payment was in practice difficult. Both the scaled salary and bonus system aimed at breaking the long-standing and dominant *Da Guo Fan* system that favoured absolute egalitarianism. As A3 noted, 'Giving people bonuses was considered revisionism.' Though it involved by today's standards a very small amount of money, according to A4 (a then Suwen leader), the reform efforts at the time were considered a 'very bold attempt' at the very beginning of a major reform era.

The personnel system and labour system: 'Ding Bian', 'Ding Gang', and faculty mobility

At the time, a prominent problem at Suwen, and at Chinese universities in general, was staff redundancy and low efficiency due to the *Da Guo Fan* and *Tie Fan Wan* systems. In 1980, Suwen began encouraging staff mobility to reduce academic inbreeding, both within and outside the institution. It was a purely institutional act. By the end of 1983, Suwen had 'exported' 501 personnel to other working units, mainly other universities (*Suwen University's education reform: Selected important documents*, 1985, p. 12; Wang, 2016, p. 55).

In 1981, Suwen implemented *Ding Gang*, referring to the practice of defining how many positions/jobs an institution requires, and *Ding Bian*, referring to the practice of defining how many individuals an institution needs (Suwen University History Committee, 2006). In this way, Suwen could clearly outline how many positions and individuals it required to support its operations in order to avoid overemployment and to redefine its staff-teacher-student ratio. Suwen further defined the specific responsibilities of each position. These stipulations were achieved through experiments within the institution (implemented in selected departments first, and later expanded to the whole university).

Concomitantly, the university encouraged its faculty to actively seek external financial resources, such as part-time teaching and research projects beyond their required responsibilities. It also encouraged faculty to distribute research outputs to a wider audience to contribute to national economic development while increasing institutional revenue. This experimental form of marketisation, though highly controversial, gradually brought in what we might call today 'entrepreneurship' in its

‘pursuit of industrial consultancies and joint ventures of a commercial character’ (Lewin & Xu, 1989, p.12).

Though primarily intra-institutional decisions, these reform measures confronted considerable resistance and acclaim. For example, teachers had grown accustomed to the idea of ‘belonging to one position for a lifetime’ and saw their positions as part of the old *Tie Fan Wan* system. Therefore, they were reluctant to move to other institutions, considering it to be ‘face-losing’, as recalled by A2, who had direct experience with the reform and knowledge of Suwen’s history. In spite of severe resistance, Suwen was able to streamline its staff and institutions, encourage mobility and increase efficiency. Its efforts were highly regarded by the then Vice Premier Wan Li (Suwen University archive, 1984, Jan 21).

The governance system: Empower the university and departments

In this management reform, Suwen attempted to reform its institutional governance system by devolving more power to individual departments. At the time, the decision-making power within the institution coalesced around the university leadership. In 1983, the university decided to reorganise its power structure, giving individual departments more power in faculty appointments, teaching practices and financial resources allocation (Suwen University History Committee, 2006).

At the same time, Suwen’s leadership continued to actively seek increased autonomy from the MoE by repeatedly submitting reports and appeals. It requested twelve kinds of autonomy; the MoE approved seven of them, ranging from establishing disciplines and admitting more graduate students to providing paid service to society (Suwen University archive, 1983, March 10).

5.2.2 Stakeholders and their interactions

The institutionally initiated management reform was clearly a reflection of the pro-reform trend of the late 1970s and early 1980s and closely linked to the university leaders' vision, entrepreneurship and resolution. It is noteworthy, however, that support from high-level leaders was key to the success of this seemingly 'bottom-up' reform initiative: sometimes it was reflected in their support of certain strategies; sometimes it is embedded in their implicit endorsement of the institution. The ad-hoc intervention from the state (from both the central government and local government) also influenced the direction and development of the reform. This section discusses the respective roles of involved stakeholders in the initiation and implementation phase and focuses on the strategic roles played by certain state actors and university leaders and their interactions in the experiment process.

University leaders

From an analysis of its actions, it quickly became clear that the university approached its expanded administrative authority from a strategic perspective. For example, for all its measures concerning funding, Suwen reported first to the state –'to our local government, to the Ministries, and even to the central government' (A4) and only proceeded once their respective approvals were obtained. For primarily institutional measures – i.e. under the purview of the university's authority and power – Suwen avoided the government's involvement in the process. These choices reflect the university leaders' strategic thinking and the visionary, entrepreneurial spirit driving their reforms.

The Ministries

The Ministry M, Suwen's direct administrative authority until 1982, played a critical role in the university's initiatives (Fan, 2002). The minister's support, in

particular, was key to Suwen's introduction of a bonus system and scaled salary system. After the MoE took over in 1983, the university continued to enjoy a great level of support and quite expanded space for its operation. It happened to be a time when the MoE was gradually streamlining its administrative structure and delegating more and more autonomy and power to individual institutions. For example, it allowed several universities to experimentally set up University Councils as advisory bodies in 1983. Similarly, local governments participated in this wave of reform by granting more autonomy to HEIs and encouraging their further reforms. This overall reform environment was conducive to Suwen's specific initiatives.

The local government

The local government authorities kept their distance from the university's initial reforms and responded positively when Suwen approached them for administrative approval. Notably, the impact of Suwen's experimental reforms at a later stage on the local tertiary HE reforms was quite substantial. In 1984, the local government began to actively advocate the experience of Suwen's management reforms to other HEIs in its jurisdiction and subsequently implemented a set of similar strategies, such as contract-based employment, staff mobility, specified accountability for each position, and a bonus system (*Suwen University's education reform: Selected important documents,* 1985). In June 1984, the local government allowed 44 HEIs to jointly develop a pilot appointment system (*pin ren zhi*) for university leadership positions. The HEIs were given autonomy to admit students beyond the state's restrictions, to adjust disciplines, to connect teaching, research and industry, and to seek external funding for educational causes. All of these experimental, pilot initiatives were later included in the national reform plan published in 1985. The local government also actively mobilised social

forces in HE development and, following the Suwen reform model, promoted their marketisation.

National Leaders

A critical stakeholder in this process was state's high-level leaders—their support not only streamlined the reform process, but also clearly influenced the thinking and actions of the other policy actors. At the very beginning, Suwen strategically engaged the state's central leadership in its own administration. Chai, the Minister of the Ministry M, was invited to become the Vice President of the University Council. Chai in turn invited then Vice Premier Wang to act as the President of the University Council since Chai believed that Southoshore needed 'a higher level leader's support to escort its reform' (Wang, 2000, p.265).

Sometimes such support is explicit, as reflected in a couple of visits by national leaders and MoE officials. For example, on 26th September 1984, in Wang's meeting with some Suwen leaders, he explicitly stated that 'Suwen's reform was supported by the central authority. You should follow your own way and do not be afftected by those slanderous gossips'; later on the same day, Wang further encouraged them to engage in 'bold exploration, bold experimentation and bold reform' and 'ignore groundless talk in the society' (Wang, 1996, p. 260). Such support clearly encouraged Suwen's initiatives and helped it clear obstacles. Moreover, in 1984, the then statesman Deng, accompanied by Wang and leaders from local government, met with representatives from Suwen. It was a clear signal of the state's support in the Chinese context. On the same day, Wang and local government leaders visited the Suwen campus, where Wang expressed Deng's unqualified support for the university's initiatives. This gesture by the state's leadership officially marked Suwen's initiative as 'a prototype of reform' in HE management structure (Yin, 1993).

Sometimes, their presence alone signalled an informal 'back-up'. For example, Chai's and Wang's existence inside the leadership of Suwen might allow the reforms to proceed more smoothly. 'On many occasions, it was because of them that our reforms were able to take short cuts' (A2). The support manifested itseslf in various ways: in particular, direct approvals of specific measures and strategic linkages to higher officials. A5, a Suwen leader who participated directly in the reform process, recalled that some people ironically claimed that Suwen was granted the freedom to explore and experiment with management reforms only because it had a good 'dad' – referring to the fact that Wang acted as the head of Suwen's University Council and hence a 'curator' for its reforms.

The significance of the involvement of high-level leaders in the reform processes was not particular to China, but it was especially true that in a centralised, hierarchical and bureaucratic–oriented society like China, where official ranks were given priority, the opinions and stances of the state's leaders carried great weight in the progress of the reform process. C4, who witnessed the changes of Suwen from the outside, recalled how the planned economy governed Chinese society and the mindsets of the Chinese people at the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up: 'Acquiescence from the top was a critical intangible asset for those reforms from the bottom: they would confront fewer obstacles down the line. This was China's reality.'

Aware of constraints set by such existing institutions and the importance of national patronage, the Suwen leadership believed that the best way to avoid conflicts was to communicate as early as possible with the state. 'We believed that our stand, in essence, was well-aligned with the state's' (A4). During the implementation phase, the state did not frequently intervene because Suwen kept an open communication channel

and maintained friendly relations with the government. ‘Even when there were conflicts, we could negotiate —the government and HEIs were not antagonistic’ (A3).

Through such interaction, the state’s intention, or that of some of its leaders, was entwined with the university’s practices in the initiation and implementation phases. In this sense, even if it was perceived as a ‘grassroots-level’ reform, Suwen was already in communication with the state’s authorities about its intentions and only proceeded to implement measures after a detailed negotiation process. As confirmed by A3, ‘We certainly had already coordinated and communicated beforehand, otherwise we could not proceed.’ For example, for the salary reforms, ‘getting approval from above was the only way to do it – otherwise it would have been considered an example of revisionism. In fact, if the local government and Ministry M didn’t approve it, we couldn’t even withdraw money then from the People’s Bank of China.’ A5 echoed this assessment: ‘It was indeed an institutional initiative, but it would not have been able to proceed without the state’s approval and support. This was the norm in China’s reform process.’ As A2 further explained,

> Many strategies, especially those involving money, had to acquire approval from the state’s administrative authorities. But there were many ways to achieve this end. For example, having Wang as part of our University Council, or acquiring Deng’s direct approval.

In fact, B2, a MoE official in the 1990s, was skeptical about the existence of pure locally initiated, bottom-up experimental reforms in China’s HE. In his view, there was always a top official standing behind a seemingly local initiative: ‘In a real sense, bottom-up reforms are very rare in China. This has more to do with China’s traditional culture, political reality and history. Even though, it doesn’t take away from the significance of local initiatives.’ (B2).

In general, state actors at various levels took a supportive stance. In one sense, such support might ‘came primarily from the idea of supporting reform, rather than

support for the specific content of our reform. It was not necessarily about how correct our specific measures were' (A4). As articulated by the then Vice Premier Wan in his meeting with some Suwen leaders, 'our reform is explortary – it may succeed, and it may fail. But we cannot stop reforming due to such uncertainty' (Suwen University History Committee, 2006, p. 823). A4 further elaborated on the pervasiveness of the then ubiquitous pro-reform atmosphere: 'We all knew that the existing institutions had to change, but none of us knew how.' When a certain university wished to explore the possibilities for change, 'The state certainly supported it and allowed them to make mistakes even when it went off the tracks.' He cited Deng Xiaoping's claim for support: 'We allow you to remain the same and not engage in reforms, but we would not allow you to object to other people's reforms.' In this sense, the government allowed Suwen to explore because real solutions often came from the grass-roots level (A4). This whole initiative was opening up a completely unknown territory. While Deng Xiaoping was appealing for Chinese people to emancipate their minds, those people in practice had to, as the old Chinese proverb says, 'cross the river by feeling the stones.' It was also the university's task to assure the state's top officials that the solutions they were developing were viable and safe because, as everyone was fully aware, reform often comes with the concern of maintaining stability in an era of radical change.

5.2.3 Institutional rationales behind the Suwen experiment

This section further explores Suwen's institutional rationales against the broader social, economic and political context.

The word 'reform' made its début in contemporary China in an official paper that resulted from a working conference of the Central Party Committee in April 1979. It was part of the 'eight-character' guideline (in English it translates into the four words 'adjustment, reform, rectification, improvement'). Since Hu Yaobang came to power in

the 1980s (1981-1987), the theme of 'reform' became predominant for the following decade. A group of state leaders' pro-reform principle was evidently reflected in the claim 'we allow for mistakes in reform, but we don't stand in the way of reform.' (Wang, 2006, p. 249). With hindsight, it may sound like an extreme claim, but it accurately did reflect at the time the CPC leadership's pro-reform orientation. Meanwhile, people longed for a period of reform to correct the excesses of the wasteful and disastrous ten-year Cultural Revolution.

It is important to perceive the Suwen experiment in this context to fully understand it. 'We [Suwen] took advantage of the trend and the state supported us—our intentions clicked' (A2). 'The state did not intervene in specific reforms but encouraged them,' A4 also noted; 'We were lucky to catch this trend at the very beginning, and we benefited tremendously from being the first to change.'

After the Cultural Revolution, Suwen was also among the first group of HEIs exposed to foreign influence and the first university, in 1978, to form a delegation to conduct foreign visits. The foreign visit itself was a breakthrough; more importantly, it liberated Suwen's mindset and pushed it to embrace a reforming mindset. A2 believed that the vast difference between Suwen and its international counterparts really shocked its President. Exposed to international ideas and practices also enabled the delegation's innovative thinking. It was an external impetus that propelled some of Suwen's leaders to proactively seek change and reform.

Moreover, those changes were closely connected to and tailored to the then existing problems Suwen perceived. The university's leadership believed that one of the urgent problems at the time was the poor condition of Chinese intellectuals, especially university faculty—they were paid poorly and trapped in the rigid and absolutist inefficiency of the *Da Guo Fan* system. This perception was the primary impetus for

Suwen to start its reform initiative by addressing the inequities of the distribution system (bonus, scaled salary, etc.), which later led to a more comprehensive set of management reforms.

5.2.4 Reception and policy influence

As 'the first man who eats crab'[9], Suwen successfully attracted and maintained the national spotlight for quite a long period of time and attracted nationwide attention from the media, the public and its peer institutions. Many other universities had a positive attitude towards Suwen's reform initiative and tried to imitate it, but many others were more skeptical or even opposed what Suwen was trying to do.

In 1984, Suwen representatives formally introduced its management reform to the National Conference of Ideological and Political Work, jointly held by the MoE, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CPC and the Central Communist Youth League in Beijing. The annual Government Report released in the Second Plenary Session of the 6th Central Committee of the CPC on 10th May 1985 officially included Suwen's reform measures. It was considered, at the time, the highest form of recognition of an experimental attempt initiated by a local institution (A2) and rare for a specific HEI to be mentioned in the annual Government Report. It was also frequently reported by national media – for example, the *People's Daily* published a series of reports documenting and advocating various strategies taken by Suwen in its management reform (Suwen University History Committee, 2006). State leaders' recognition of Suwen experiment was also frequently featured in media, such as *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily* and *Jiefang Daily* (Wang, 1996). It represents another form of support and recognition by the state since those national media is considered as state outlet.

[9] It is a Chinese proverb used to describe someone who dares to be the first one to try new things or innovate.

Later, the government published *Decision on the Reforms of China's Educational System* (1985) (hereinafter the *Decision*). The *Decision* pointed out the constraints of excessive government control and the necessity for granting more power to institutions for HE restructuring. Meanwhile, the HEIs were granted more autonomy in terms of revenue seeking, flexibility regarding admission and graduate employment, and internal management (Item 15). The focus of this period was to adjust the relationship between the central government and the HEIs. In 1986, the State Council published the *Provisional Regulations of higher education management responsibilities*. The series of documents were widely regarded as crucial policy documents in education reforms for the coming decade (Cheng, 1986). They 'represented a consolidation of many ideas that had been discussed and even tried out in selected areas' (Lewin & Xu, 1989, p. 9), and 'enshrine(d) new thinking of which the implications are only now beginning to become apparent' (Lewin & Xu, 1989, p. 16). The gist of Suwen's reforms was clearly reflected in this series of policy documents. They ignited a new round of educational reforms nationwide with the traceable imprint of the Suwen experiment. As A5 commented, 'The *Decision* recognised almost all measures taken by us in the beginning of the 1980s'.

Despite the support from some state leaders, some of Suwen's bold attempts still caused controversies and faced opposition. From time to time, certain conservative officials were unsupportive of some initiatives. There were also many complaint letters, many of them anonymous, which posed serious questions and expressed scepticism about the way Suwen's experiment had acquired direct access to the highest levels of the central government and the Central Party Committee, as recalled by A5. The respondent further illustrated. Certain people at the time raised suspicion regarding the content of the reform. Some believed that a university should focus on teaching reform

rather than management reform. A1, a Suwen leader, recalled how Suwen addressed this suspicion: 'Teaching reforms rely on teachers, so we had to firstly motivate our teachers by enhancing their welfare.' This strategic decision aligned well with the then social theme of restoring the status of intellectuals, who had come under severe oppression during the Cultural Revolution. 'Though it seemed to be a simple step', reflected by A4, 'with hindsight, our management reform was in essence a prelude to the current Modern University System building reform.'

Many peer institutions visited Suwen to observe and possibly learn from its experience, especially after Deng Xiaoping personally praised its efforts and the university published a book *A preliminary exploration of management reform* in 1984 to promote its experience (Wang, 1996).

The reactions from peer institutions and other observers, however, were mixed. For example, A6, the leader of Wantong University, regarded Suwen's attempt in breaking the then dominant egalitarianism quite effective. While C4, a scholar in another university who observed the reform process from outside, remained neutral about it: 'Suwen is located in an open city. It was among the first of the HEIs to open-up their minds. But we were not really optimistic about its controversial measures.' Similarly, B1, a high-level MoE official in the 1990s, was skeptical about many of Suwen's plans. The respondent explained, 'It was an institutional exploration and did have some influence in China. But the reform was too much about money.' Most institutions assumed a non-committal wait-and-see posture. 'The state did speak highly of our reform, but it did not require every university to imitate us.' (A4) Hence, it was each institution's freedom to choose whether to reform or not, and in what ways: 'At the time, every university recognised the importance to reform, though they may have different understandings of and approaches to changes' (A4).

In sum, despite their often controversial reception, many of Suwen's strategies won the government's recognition and endorsement, influencing subsequent HE policy formulation. The university leaders' 'liberation of mind' created a precedent among educators and contributed to the initiation and implementation of similar initiatives (A5).

5.3 Seeking 'autonomy' in restricted conditions

5.3.1 A comparative account: Wantong University

This section discusses the institutional initiative launched during the same period by Wantong University, an elite university located in Central China. Though Wantong pursued a different set of reform measures, their initiative represented a similar type of institutional effort to acquire expanded autonomy from the state to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of China's lagging HE system. With the other HEIs discussed above, Wantong demonstrated, at the dawn of the reform era, how elite universities across the nation were developing innovative approaches and increasing their autonomy to improve HE in China.

Unlike the Suwen results, however, the Wantong experiment did not have a propitious ending. Promoted primarily by Wantong's then President L (A6), the initiative focused on introducing reforms in teaching and learning. A6 believed that reforming the teaching system was the most direct and effective way for China to produce an educated and skilled labour force. In the following discussion, 'teaching system' refers to admission, study duration, pedagogical practices, examinations and teaching management (Liu, 2005; Liu, 2011). To achieve its goal, Wantong designed and introduced three innovative measures to experiment with its teaching reforms.

Adopt a credit system

The President came across the idea of a 'credit system' in 1977 when he was Director of the MoE's Department of Higher Education. Deeply intrigued by the idea,

he developed and introduced this initiative of 'Introducing a credit system' in 1978 for a national education conference executive report. The MoE further agreed to allow other HEIs to experiment with the 'credit system' idea (Liu, 2005).

In 1980, Wantong was among the first universities to respond to this initiative. When A6 subsequently became the president of Wantong University in 1981, he used his authority as President to have the 'credit system' fully adopted, the first HEI in China at the time to do so. Within the institution, the reform proceeded gradually and incrementally, in true experimental fashion, with two departments implemented first (Wu, 1993).

Under the 'credit system' approach, a student was allowed more latitude to choose elective courses in their curriculum and still graduate as long as he/she completed the required credits. To achieve this change, the four-year degree was divided into two parts (two years plus two years) and the five-year degree into two parts (two years plus three years; or three years plus two years). With this approach, students also had the option to choose to graduate in two years with a two-year diploma if they wished. In this way, students were given limited freedom to indivdiualise their curriculum and tailor their studies based on their interests and capabilities.

This individualised arrangement, however, came in to direct conflict with the state's uniform job assignment system (i.e., a rigid system that assigned particular graduates to particular employment positions). It also attracted vocal criticism—some people thought it 'restored capitalism' by contaminating a socialist HE system with an American-style capitalist credit system. As A6 later pointed out, 'I didn't care about what others said because I thought this was the right way to make our rigid teaching system more flexible.'

At the MoE, many officials believed that it went against the basic principles of the Soviet model that Chinese universities were following and which was regarded as highly successful. The President L (A6) responded: 'I did not say that a credit system was the only viable way. But we could experiment and see how things go'. Gradually, L persuaded MoE officials to allow Wantong to proceed unobstructed with the experiment. This initiative was a typical example of how universities could leverage an experimental approach to negotiate an expanded autonomous space to try out new, untested ideas. By 1983, 28 students had graduated early under this reformed credit system approach (Ye, 2013, p. 376).

Student mobility

Wantong futher introduced a series of strategies to enhance the students' freedom to select their majors and choose their areas of specialisation. For example, a 'dual degree' programme (made up of two associated bachelor degrees) and a 'minor degree' programme were instituted in the hope of improving the students' employability and their ability to cope with the growing demands of a rapidly expanding and fiercely competitive market economy (Wu, 1993; Liu, 2005).

Later, Wantong allowed students to transfer between specialties within the institution. At the time, the state uniformly administered university admission and graduation – transfer was strictly prohibited as it interrupted the state's central plan. Wantong went ahead anyway with the change without securing the state's administrative approval in advance. This overreach caused a great controversy nationwide when it was later reported in the newspapers.

In addition, Wantong further experimented with a transfer system which allowed students from other universities to transfer to Wantong and also provided for the admission of non-students who had already obtained a two-year college degree or its

equivalent as a third-year student upon passing an institutional examination (Wu, 1993). A6 reflected, 'It was a very advanced and contentious move—we wanted to allow those self-taught non-students and students from non-elite universities to be able to enroll in our institution.' This approach was a major innovation to traditional university practice in China. It opened up a traditionally elite route to HE to those who previously had been excluded. Before Wantong could implement it, the transfer measure first had to be approved by the government since it involved admissions, job assignment and funding (the state allocated certain funds to each admitted student).

Therefore, in 1984, Wantong asked the MoE for approval of an experiment but received no further instruction. In May, the President L travelled to Beijing to try to persuade the then Director of MoE's First Department of Higher Education. L was rebuffed, however: he was told that 'such an experiment was too complicated.' L persisted in trying to persuade the Director, but he was told finally to wait for further notice. Soon after his return to Wantong, L received permission from the MoE's First Department of Higher Education but the report was referred to the MoE's Department of Planning for further approval. After another three months of waiting, L visited the MoE again in August and successfully persuaded the relevant director regarding the feasibility of this experiment. The MoE later submitted this appeal to the State Planning Commission (SPC). A6 recalled his third trip to Beijing to ask for permission from the SPC, which eventually approved the plan and granted Wantong a ratio of 90 students to try out this new measure. In 1985, Wantong admitted 92 transfer students.

Abolition of the political tutor system

The political tutor system was first introduced in 1962 by China's elite Tsinghua University. It was later adopted nation-wide by all HEIs. In each university, one specialised political tutor was required to guide the development of an appropriate

socialist mindset and prevent 'revisionist' ideas for each hundred students. As A6 commented, 'I found such a system highly inefficient. Those political tutors generally were recent university graduates and did not have the capacity to effectively help students.' So in 1984, Wantong abolished the political tutor system; instead, it introduced a tutorial system which emulated the Oxford and Cambridge tradition. Under this revised arrangement, each faculty served as a tutor for at least ten students (Wu, 1993). This controversial initiative became an integral part of Wantong's teaching reform. It was politically sensitive and provoked a great uproar from the public and strong reaction from the government. As A6 recalled, he was called into the MoE, where he had a heated debate with its director:

> He accused me of weakening the students' political guidance. I argued with him about the legitimacy of its very existence—the political tutor was a product of a specific politically sensitive period. I persuaded him to give our institution a try. He didn't agree to anything, but there was nothing he could do to stop me. And certainly, after I was later dismissed from my position, Wantong was required to restore the political tutor system.

All Wantong's reform measures, though in the name of an 'experiment', were still considered highly controversial. They were widely reported by the media and attracted great nationwide attention. Predictably, imitators were scarce (Liu, 2005). The Wantong President was later dismissed from his position and Wantong returned to its pre-reform practices.

5.3.2 Factors influencing the outcome of an experiment

After the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, one of the most influential slogans was 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' because no one was certain how to introduce these massive changes, though there was a consensus regarding the necessity to do it. 'Reform' was a trendy phrase, but people could only discover their own way through repeated experiments and a rigorous process of trial and error since there were no precedents for the proper course of action.

The power structure in China also allowed high-level leaders or authorities to approve reform requests from the beginning in the name of 'experimentation' without the need to change government regulations or laws. This was the modus operandi (with Chinese characteristics) which Suwen utilised in its interactions with the central and local government. When proved successful, the state did respect local initiatives and consider the possibility for expansion on a larger scale. At the same time, as an elite university, Suwen had a good track record of reform and a stellar enough reputation to win the state's trust to allow it the leeway to explore and experiment, though 'you may not necessarily find this as a legitimate reason in an official written text' (A4).

It is also true that though the state was advocating the idea of reform and 'emancipation of minds', people still shuddered at the thought of past events. As A6 noted, 'The lingering fear of frequent political movements in the previous decade had made many people extremely cautious about engaging in reforms. Education was always a sensitive area—a barometer of political movements.' This factor perhaps explains why reforms had to start on a small scale and on an experimental, trial and error basis. There seemed to be a clear need for an effective evidence-building process that could lead naturally to further reforms. This approach also seemed suitable for dealing with the concerns of people involved in the process who tended to hold on to the past and defend the ways of operating they had become accustomed to while too quickly rejecting change and innovation. It might account for why certain universities, as the two institutions discussed in this chapter, intentionally chose an experimental approach to institutional change in the beginning of China's reform era.

Then, why the two experiments projected different roles in China's reform history? Compared to Wantong, how did Suwen successfully bring about such a transformation? How did Suwen acquire a relatively high degree of autonomy, build a

workable consensus and create a dynamic reform atmosphere while making a major contribution to the 'golden age' of Chinese higher education? This section explores, in comparative perspective, how Suwen's success on the micro level was closely synchronised with the macro transformations that were taking place on the social, economic and cultural level.

The Cultural Revolution had marked the climax of the Maoist philosophy of education. It had been essentially a de-schooling and anti-intellectual movement in which education was merely used as a tool to provide for a well-trained labour force rather than to develop intellectual elites. In this crucible, individuality was sacrificed to the general welfare of society.

After the Cultural Revolution, both Suwen and Wantong shared the objective of redressing this imbalance between the individual and society and especially of re-establishing the status and benevolent treatment of intellectuals in Chinese society. In one sense, this study argues that the reforms launched beginning in 1978, such as Suwen's and Wantong's experiments could be regarded as an attempt to restore the significance of knowledge, the status of intellectuals and the value of individuality. At the time, the relationship between teachers and the Party is not particular harmouious (He, 2008, as cited in China Higher Education Academy, 2008). This acute need was especially prominent in the HEIs where the majority of traditional intellectual elites were gathered. For example, Suwen's personnel reform aimed at encouraging individual productivity, creativity and initiative. It was a specific expression of the general public's support for change and the advocacy of certain national leaders (not least Deng Xiaoping) for 'emancipating the mind' (a very Marxist term still) and 'crossing the river by feeling the stones'. The overall pro-reform climate contributed to the implementation, success, and recognition of Suwen's experimental reform.

Moreover, the Reform and Opening-up policy that began in the late 1970s had a transformative impact on China. The transition from a planned economy to a planned market economy (and later market economy in the late 1980s) required the HEIs to align their policies with market needs. As indicated by the interviewees (A6; B1), the restoration of *Gao Kao* in 1977 and the subsequent HE expansion had caused some serious problems, especially in terms of funding and graduate employment; The HE system was also highly inefficient, with poorly motivated staff and students, making it increasingly unable to meet the country's burgeoning economic and technology needs. Therefore, this imbalance between supply and demand created a necessity for change, change through experimentation. Suwen's measures, especially an embrace of efficiency, competition and mobility aligned with those needs. Suwen's reform strategies also responded to the then challenges which faced Chinese universities in general, so their initiative aligned well with the HE development trajectory, making them replicable to a wider context. The experiment outcomes served as evidence in support of this line of development.

The success of the reform measures also had to do with the reform measures themselves and the manner of their implementation. Compared to Suwen's, some of Wantong's measures were 'too bold and too radical' (A4). In contrast, 'there was absolutely no major political issues involved in the Suwen reform' (A4), whose leaders kept their steps gradual and measured. In the Chinese system, the reform process is often prolonged and replete with oscillations—these innovations must proceed gradually. Reformists with great visions often face obstacles and experience failures. Therefore, 'reformers in China must have strategies—experimentation is one of those strategies', assessed by B6, an educational researcher and practitioner.

Suwen took a gradual approach in the especially sensitive political areas that were less integrated (with other issues) and relatively easier to implement. Suwen was careful to respect the government's priorities and protocols by following a prolonged but deliberate process of dynamic interaction and negotiation with the state at every step. As A4 reflected,

> Those reform measures were quite controversial at the time; but with hindsight, those changes were actually very small and elementary. The reason the state allowed our reforms and gave us the power to do so might have to do with the fact that those changes were not fundamental.

Suwen benefited, in addition, from its institutional history, culture and selected leaders. It valued an innovative entrepreneurial spirit and an esprit of 'keeping up with the times' (A2), both of which factors drove its initiatives. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of a group of determined and courageous educators who were brave enough to assume innovative leadership roles in some of Chinese elite universities such as Suwen. In their visions, these leaders created strategies designed to bring about major changes and acquire the necessary support to make those changes stick. This became a decisive factor in the success of Suwen's reform efforts. By unifying opinions of the then President, the then Party Secretary of Suwen and other leadership within the institution, they worked together to push for change. In one sense, it might indicate the relatively 'success' of Suwen's experiment to Wantong's experiment, which was primarily relied on efforts of a single leader (the then President L) and his supporters.

To a degree, the Wantong experiment was heavily identified with its then president L, and bore the bold imprint of his aggressive personality and education philosophy. Throughout the process, the President L was highly proactive in seeking the concrete realisation of his educational vision. His vision came in part from his high-profile career (he had been a high-level policy official at the MoE and a prominent educator), his personality (he was entrepreneurial and able to challenge the authorities),

his popularity (his proposed innovations were popular and welcomed), and his power (university presidents had wide latitude to exercise their authority). But he did not intentionally seek the support from high-level leaders to back up his controversial measures and took a strong position in negotiating with the state—he was merely seeking necessary approvals rather than support.

From a consideration of Wantong's measures, it seemed that the state, as represented primarily by the MoE, had assumed a relatively weak position. A6 recalled that most reform measures he initiated had nothing to do with the MoE: 'When we wanted to do something, we did it'. There was only one exception—the cross-institutional transfer. But 'even for this measure, during its actual implementation, there was no state involvement at all' (A6). As A4 commented, 'He was a highly respected educator, who thought big and acted courageously, but he rushed his reforms without having anyone at the top with the political influence to back him up.' This represented a striking contrast with Suwen, whose leaders were clearly aware of the importance of, and strategically looked, both formally and informally, for support from high-level officials. Government officials, both at the central and local government levels, were also an integral part of Suwen's reforms. Their influence was prevalent (ironically) even in reforms aimed at the decentralisation, and devolution of power and institutional autonomy. The impact of those reforms was reflected to differing degrees, ranging from the national leaders' ideological advocacy of experimentation to administrative support for actual implementation. As C6, an established scholar in educational research and practice, reflected:

> There were certain spaces that Chinese universities could make use of, but their leaders had to learn how to deal with the government, which formed an integral aspect of leadership for a university president. If you wanted to achieve your reform objectives and acquire government support, then you had to know the boundaries that circumscribed your reform efforts and how to negotiate with the state to get those boundaries widened—it is an art.

Last, the experiment results, singularly and collectively, indicates that the then incomplete and immature institutional environment was not conducive to the successful conduct of reform measures as taken by Wantong. As A23, a policy researcher in another elite university, noted, the unavailability of the necessary conditions to allow for those 'far advanced' reform measures were one of the biggest obstacles. As the respondent recalled, when his institution (another research university) decided to introduce a credit system, they conducted certain research visits but Wantong was not even considered a good example: 'It barely left any impact in this aspect. The conditions were just not right for its implementation at the time.' In his opinion, even until now, China does not even have a fully developed environment to employ a credit system, let alone 40 years ago. Adoption of a credit system requires flexible duration of study, whereas in the 1980s, everything was constrained by the state's mandatory plans. It also needs an elective system. At the time, not only were all courses decided, designed and fixed by the state, but allowing students to freely choose courses also would imply that there were enough educational resources, e.g. courses, teachers and classrooms on offer. At the time, all these resources were scarce. The Wantong experiment might be a well-intentioned institutional attempt to solve certain existing problems, 'but you could not solve them all at once'. C2, an education scholar, reflected the reform, 'I admire the effort, but I don't think it really influenced the course of China's HE. It may have even discouraged other reform initiatives.'

These reasons discussed above explain in part factors influencing the outcome of an experiment. Though both initiatives were courageous experimental reforms in the hope of solving similar problems at the same period, Suwen and Wantong took very different approaches to their reform content and interactions with the state. The broader pro-reform social context was an important factor that encouraged and enabled their

experiments, but their experiments, in turn, were restricted by the then prevailing conservative institutional environment.

5.4 Summary

The chapter explored the efforts of Suwen University to introduce far-reaching management reform into its institutional governance in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It included three major innovative elements. It allowed for differentiated payment to faculty and staff coupled with a bonus system, breaking the existing 'absolute equality' (*Da Guo Fan*) system stipulated by both government regulations and the people's belief system. The Suwen reforms also challenged the traditional way of pinning down one person to one position once and for all. It allowed for and even encouraged faculty mobility. At the same time, Suwen devolved more power to individual departments to enhance their autonomy. All three of these innovative elements were controversial, particularly at the start of the reform era when people were still trying to recover from the often bizarre and mercurial strictures that had prevailed during the Cultural Revolution.

The chapter presented a thick description of the vision, design and implementation of Suwen University's comprehensive management reform in order to demonstrate how it was able to initiate these changes, implement its strategies, and interact with the state to navigate its reform during a highly volatile political and social period. It explored Suwen's institutional rationles behind its experiment, such as the rapidly changing economic and social conditions and high-level advocacy of reforms and the experimentalist approach in state rhetoric. The university's policy entrepreneurs - their visions, perceptions of the then pressing problems as well as abilities to form an advocacy coalition with certain state leaders and negotiate with the state - prove to be critical in the process. Many of these strategies later became highly regarded by the

state and utilised as model paradigms imitated by peer institutions.

The chapter discussed another institutional experiment, initiated and implemented by Wantong University in the same period. Though its focus was on teaching reforms, it ran in a similar vein: to explore possibilities to acquire more institutional autonomy and to initiate change in a state-controlled yet rapidly changing era. Wantong's experiment, however, was not as successful as Suwen's—it was largely aborted and barely had any influence on other universities.

The chapter provided a comparative perspective in explaining the different outcomes of the two experiments. It placed particular attention on their different approaches to their reform content and interactions with the state. Together, it explored how the experimental efforts and embedded state-university interaction resonated with the broader economic, social and governance reforms which were unfolding in China at that time.

Chapter 6. Case II: Reforming university graduate employment assignment system

6.1 Introduction

Once the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, the new state implemented a centrally planned economic system. As an integral part of that system, the state assumed direct control and played a dominant role in the university graduate employment system, making employment assignments for new graduates. This system at first was rigid and inflexible; the graduates themselves had no choices about their careers. The situation only began to change in the early-to-middle 1980s when the state decided to reform the system through experiments at two universities. In this thesis, they are respectively referred to as Tongye University, an elite research university in northern China, and Shirui University, an elite research university in southern China. Based on these experiments, a reformed and more flexible nationwide employment system for university graduates was only fully adopted and implemented in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In this thesis, 'university graduate(s)' refers to recent graduates from four-year undergraduate programmes in China's public universities. The term 'university graduate employment assignment system' refers specifically to China's centrally controlled employment system, in which the state assigned each individual graduate to a specific job position in a work unit (in Chinese, referred to as *fen pei*). A work unit (*dan wei*) is a specifically designated place of employment and includes its team of workers—usually a *dan wei* was located in one of China's state-owned enterprises. From 1985 to 1998, the Ministry of Education (MoE) was renamed as the State Education Committee (SEC). So both names would be used in this chapter.

The chapter discusses the evolution of the reforms of the university graduate employment assignment system in China starting in the middle 1980s (Period II in this

thesis) pioneered by Tongye University and Shirui Univeristy. Despite their official status as 'experiment points', these officially designated universities were given the latitude to operate in a relatively expanded and open 'strategy space' with minimal state intervention. To provide an enriched historical context, the chapter introduces the university graduate employment assignment system that operated in the early 1980s (6.2) and focuses on describing how the two universities evolved and introduced reforms to the system (6.3). The chapter further explores the role of the experiment in the design and introduction of the subsequent national reforms to the graduate employment assignment system by linking it to the broader socio-economic changes that were taking place in China during the decade of the 1980s (6.4).

The interviewees relevant to this case, their positions and their designated codes in this chapter can be referred to in Appendix IV. The documents relevant to this case include both primary documents, such as university yearbooks and government papers, and secondary literature, such as the biographies and articles of the key players, media reports and secondary research by interested scholars (see references).

6.2 China's university graduate employment assignment system: Pre-reform

After 1949, the new-formed state of China assumed administrative control of the university education system through the National College Entrance Examination (*gao kao*) and of the employment of university graduates through the university graduate employment assignment system. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), however, introduced a hiatus to the functioning of the development of these higher education (HE) systems. During the Cultural Revolution, the university graduate employment assignment system followed a simple rule: those who were fortunate enough to go on to higher learning during that period (*gong nong bing*) were forced to go back to the same People's Commune they came from (this rule was referred to as *she lai she qu*, He,

1998). As a result, social mobility, especially for college graduates, was very low. After the Cultural Revolution, the G*ao Kao* system was reintroduced in 1977, bringing the situation in HE back to where it had been in 1966 – both university enrollment and graduate employment assignments were controlled by the state in accordance with the priorities and needs of the centrally planned economy (Yao, 2008).

The University Graduate Employment System that operated in China at the time was a top-down, highly centralised system with little involvement from either the universities or the students. The Ministry of Education (MoE) administered the system: based on the information gathered through the centrally administered *Gao Kao* system and their university records, the MoE compiled the graduates' information, such as their places of birth, universities and majors, and disseminated it nationwide to work units (*dan wei*). Based on the policy and planning efforts of the various ministries and departments under the umbrella of the State Council as well as provincial and municipal governments, the state then made plans according to the priorities and demands reported by individual work units in their jurisdictions. Those authorities then reported their demand plans to the State Planning Commission (SPC), which drafted its proposed employment assignments in response to the various demands and needs. With the State Council's revisions and approval, the draft formed the basis for an authoritative university graduate employment assignment plan. Then the MoE would use the input from that plan to formulate a detailed plan of operation to be distributed to each jurisdiction for implementation. After the central plan reached HEIs, the individual student did not have any freedom to oppose or challenge his/her assignment, but they were required to report to their assigned work units immediately (Fu, 2002). In this period, the main actor was the state. Though work units could report their demands, even these requirements were subject to the SPC's central plan. Vignette 1 portrays the

process of assigning a job position to an individual university student in 1982. A9, who was in charge of the Shirui experiment, discussed the details of the process:

> For example, the SPC knew that our university would graduate 60 students in the Automotive Engineering major that year. In its draft plan, it had assigned 30 students to the Changchun First Automobile Plant and 30 students to the Hubei Second Automobile Plant. This plan was first reviewed by the MoE and then by us. It was for us to decide only which 30 graduates in this major would go to which work unit.

Vignette 1 *A University Graduate Employment Assignment in the System before reform*

Vignette 1 Pre-change allocation mechanism[*]

In 1977, Huang was a member of the first cohort of students admitted to university after the Cultural Revolution. The admission rate was under 4.9%—the lowest rate in China's history. At university, Huang studied mechanical engineering in a public university in a provincial capital city. Coming from a rural town in western China, Huang worked diligently and arduously to compete against millions of other high school graduates for a coveted university admission in the newly reopened universities.

When he graduated in the spring of 1982, China had an acute need for university educated talents in almost every sector. His expertise and knowledge could make a great impact in many industries—but Huang himself had no say in deciding where he would go or what he would be doing. On the day when the university was to announce his 'assignment', Huang gathered with his course mates in their classroom to wait for those decisions that would largely determine their futures. The university announced in turn each student's work unit. The assignments varied. Some students were able to stay in the metropolis, but others were assigned back to their hometowns or to other locations in China to do something completely unrelated to their majors. Huang's experience was representative of hundreds of thousands of university students at the time, when individuals had no freedom to choose their fates.

*Adapted based on real stories, memoirs and policy documents. For example, see:

College students (Class 1978) waiting to be assigned jobs (in Chinese). (2007). Retrieved from http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2007-05-21/051711858435s.shtml. Accessed 1st April 2017.

Guidance on university graduate employment assignment. (1981, Oct 4). In He, D. (Ed). (1998). *Important education documents of the People's Republic of China (1976-1990)* (in Chinese) (pp. 1977-1978). Haikou: Hainan Chubanshe.

The graduates then were obliged to follow the state's assignments. The state also was a forceful advocate, impressing upon the students the importance and significance of their assignments in the grand scheme of China's vision for the future and roadmap for getting there. Every individual, at least in theory, had an important role to play in

achieving that vision. The central plan had individual significance for them—in the ideological context of the New China, it was an important moral imperative for everyone to subordinate their individual wants and desires to the new nation's collective priorities and demands. As one interviewee stressed, 'It was regarded as the highest value at the time.' In 1981 alone, *The People's Daily (ren min ri bao)*, China's Communist Party's official newspaper, published fifteen articles about the importance of the employment assignment system to meeting the state's goals. The articles, in essence, called for university graduates to 'go to the places where the country needs you the most' (Zhao, 2016).

Within the context and under the constraints at the time of China's centrally planned economy and institutional configuration, the university graduate employment assignment system worked well. But as A11, a then Tongye leader, reflected back on it much later, it was becoming increasingly clear that the state's rigid planning system was becoming progressively ill-suited to the rapid evolution of the economy and major changes in society. Once past the idealistic phase, the system had the effect of de-motivating university students: as A9 noted, the students had no enthusiasm or motivation to study or to dream about what they wanted to do with their lives. Control of their lives was not in their hands. Moreover, there were constant mismatches of students and jobs (Zhang, 1984; Liu & Bi, 1995). Given the scale of China's population and economy, it was apparently beyond the central government's capacity to take account of all the graduates' strengths and competencies and allocate them to suitable or even relevant employment positions. Even before the Cultural Revolution, misallocations and misplacements were rife in the assignment system (A9).

In 1980, the SPC and MoE jointly met specifically to consider modifications to the way university graduate job assignments were being allocated. This meeting

resulted in the publication of the *Report on Improving General Higher Education Institutions' Graduates Job Assignment in Year 1981* (drafted by the SPC, MoE and State Personel Bureau; approved by the State Council, 1981). This document devolved certain powers to local governments, individual higher education institutions (HEIs) and work units concerning job assignments. It suggested that graduate assignments should 'follow the state's central plan, adjusted by ratio and arranged in different levels' (The State Council, 1981). More specifically, the document recognised three types of general higher education institutions (HEIs): A) those under direct MoE administration; B) those under the administration of various ministries and commissions of the State Council, and C) those under the administration of provincial and municipal governments. For students in type A universities, their employment assignments were still administrated through the central plan, but 15%-20% graduates were allowed to remain in the cities where their universities were located if they were needed by work units in those cities. 10%-20% graduates in type B universities were arranged by the state, whereas the rest were assigned by the direct authorities within their systems. Graduates in type C universities were generally assigned by local administration, though the state could arrange jobs for some students at a ratio of no more than 10% (The State Council, 1981). The SPC gathered information reported by the administrative authorities of the three types of HEIs and made the central job assignment plan. Figure 6 shows in simplified form how the partially reformed process concerning university graduate employment assignments were made in China before 1983.

It was a complicated process. Many stakeholders and decision makers got involved at different points and levels in the process. At the time, Chinese universities were under the administration of various ministries responsible for particular professions and industries (type A and type B universities; now the MoE is the only

state ministry that directly administers HEIs). For example, Beijing Jiaotong University used to belong to the Ministry of Railways; its affiliation was only moved to the MoE in 2000. Naturally, the priority of assignment for its graduates was given to work units within the Ministry of Railroad's system rather than to work units in Beijing where the university was located.

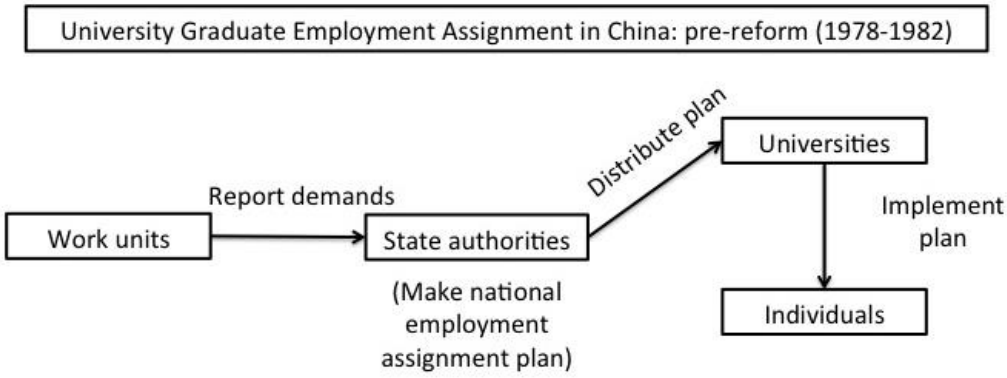


Figure 6 **University graduate employment assignments in China (pre-reform, 1978-1982)**

The SPC was still the most important stakeholder in the process, but the universities acquired more power since the *Report* allowed some universities to take a small portion of their most excellent students' preferences into consideration and place them accordingly (a process referred as *ze you fen pei*). The universities, therefore, acted as an intermediary in linking the central plan to an individual student's assignment. As a result, the employment assignment system became increasingly differentiated and more flexible, even though the individual students themselves still had little power in the process. B2, a senior MoE official in the 90s, recalled the situation (though the respondent was not directly involved in it):

> Sometimes the university's Graduate Job Assignment Office could have 100 planned positions to allocate 90 graduates, in which case there was a certain flexibility to allow for adjustments. It seemed small, but this small degree of freedom was already quite substantive, otherwise it was 90 positions to 90 graduates—one turnip for one pit. These adjustments, though, barely took account of the students' opinions. There was a strong sense of planning as a

> priority. If you were assigned to a certain position and you refused to go, that was called disobedience to *fen pei,* and it was considered at the time a very serious infraction.

Indeed, disobedience to *fen pei* was considered as a serious matter at the time. For example, according to a news report in *People's Daily* (1982, June 2), the Beijing Higher Education Bureau punished four graduates in 1982 who refused to follow their assignments: they were asked to leave the campus in a given period of time; their *hu kou* were transferred back to their hometowns; and state-owned work units were prohibited for five years from employing them.

6.3 Balancing supply versus demand against 'mutual selection' (1983-1987)

6.3.1 Initiation: The state's rationale and other factors

In 1983, the MoE began to encourage selected HEIs to engage more actively with the graduate employment assignment issue. Initially, the MoE appointed four universities to try out experimental measures to reform the employment assignment system. Later, in 1985, the MoE appointed Tongye University and Shirui University (included in the above four) as 'experiment points' to formulate and implement on an experimental basis comprehensive reform to the employment assignment system (Fang & Zhang, 2001; Cai, 2003; Fang, 2011).

The study argues that the state initiated these reform efforts to address the perceived problems at the time in the graduate employment assignment system. In the early 1980s, there was clearly a major problem accruing as a result of the mismatch between the students' skills and aspirations and the work units' demands. As A8, who had direct experience with Shirui's experiment, recalled, 'There were apparent problems associated with the system. Neither the graduates nor the work units had any flexibility or autonomy'. The graduates had to obey the state assignments while the work units had to passively accept the graduates assigned to them. 'It was not a

conducive system for the universities either—they could not use the employers' feedback as an indication for further reforms,' the respondent continued.

Moreover, since the 1978 Reform and Opening-up, the economy and society in China were changing rapidly—the resulting dislocations and anomalies were simply symptomatic of the adjustments that were needed to be made in the then rigid graduate job assignment system. As the centrally planned economy was gradually transformed into a commodity market economy (and later into a socialist market economy in the 1990s), the changing approaches to the allocation of goods and resources also called for corresponding changes to the approaches to allocate human resources. The concomitant rise of a private enterprise sector in China's economy brought free market competition in its train, putting substantial pressure on the centrally planned graduate employment assignment system, rendering parts of it increasingly unsustainable or even obsolete.

Against this economic background, there was a substantial rise in grassroots-level demands for change from the students and the work units. As B7, with background working for the MoE, explained, 'There were already many graduates disobeying their assignments or strongly protesting against the system, so the MoE had to change.' The demands for change were especially strong from the universities. 'The state did not decide to appoint our two institutions to experiment out of the blue,' commented A8:

> It was because that we were particularly eager in changing the existing situation; at the same time, we were in a better position to reform—our graduates were the most competitive ones so we were not afraid that they could not be employed…so even though we had not formally submitted a report to appeal for reforms, the experiment came to us because that the state was already aware of our needs and demands for changes.

In one sense, the state-sponsored experiment was driven by local demands arising from perceived problems and necessity to find alterative policy solutions.

6.3.2 Implementation: Collaborative work between the two experiment points

The two selected institutions, working closely together, systematically explored new ways to change the then centrally planned graduate employment assignment system. It quickly became a challenging, often politically charged process. The universities had to decode unclear and often contradictory political messages while trying to negotiate a highly imperfect labor market and the intransigent mindsets of entrenched bureaucrats who were averse to changes of any kind. It was especially complicated since the university graduate employment assignment system was not a stand-alone system in the 1980s. It was closely related to the university enrollment and fee systems and tied in to China's overall labour system[10], labour market and household registration system (*hu ji* or *hu kou*[11]) beyond the education system. So this experiment had radical repercussions: it fundamentally changed the manifold and dynamic relationships among the various stakeholders in the process. The interactions among students, universities, employers and the state were inalterably transformed.

The first phase of the experiment started in 1983 with four institutions. They tried out an approach that was later termed 'supply meets demand'. Tongye University and Shirui University tried to bring into alignment the 'supply' side (the universities) and the 'demand' side (the work units). Tongye and Shirui contacted the work units directly and submitted their recommendations on how to reform the employment assignment system to be included in the national central plan. The universities' power,

[10] Under Contemporary China's social structure, there are three statuses for working people: peasants, workers and cadres. University graduates are automatically assigned the 'cadre' status.

[11] *Hu Ji*, or *Hu Kou*, is a system of household registration in China. A legal Chinese resident is required to have a household registration record as a form of formal identification, including information of his/her name, family relationships (parents and spouse), martial status, residence and changes of residence. The household registration system is an essential system to manage human resources and limit mass migration from the rural areas to the cities—it differentiates rural and urban residency status, and documents legal residence of a certain area. For example, when a college student moved from Province A to Province B to attend a university located there, his/her *hu kou* and personal archive were transferred to Province B. When the student was assigned to certain position in Province C upon graduation, his/her *hu kou* and personal archive also transferred to the new location.

however, was quite limited—their recommendations were still subordinated to the political priorities of the central planning process (Zhang, 1984; Yuan, 1988). The purpose of this experiment was to improve the assignment system—to make it more rational, not create an employment free market. The supply-demand meeting was between the universities and the work units (before the experiment there had been no direct contact between the two: see Yuan, 1988). The students had been largely left out (Yao, 2008; *Xinhua News*, 2008, July 23). These initial reforms, however—though tentative and limited – still were considered as improvements. As A11 recalled, 'We may not have been able to meet everyone's preferences, but at least it was considered limited progress at least to take the students' opinions into consideration. But the students still didn't have a say in the overall process.' In 1984, 32% of Shirui University's graduates were directly impacted by the new approaches incorporated for the first time into the employment assignment system. The dynamics of the revised 'supply meets demand' system approach are illustrated in Figure 7.

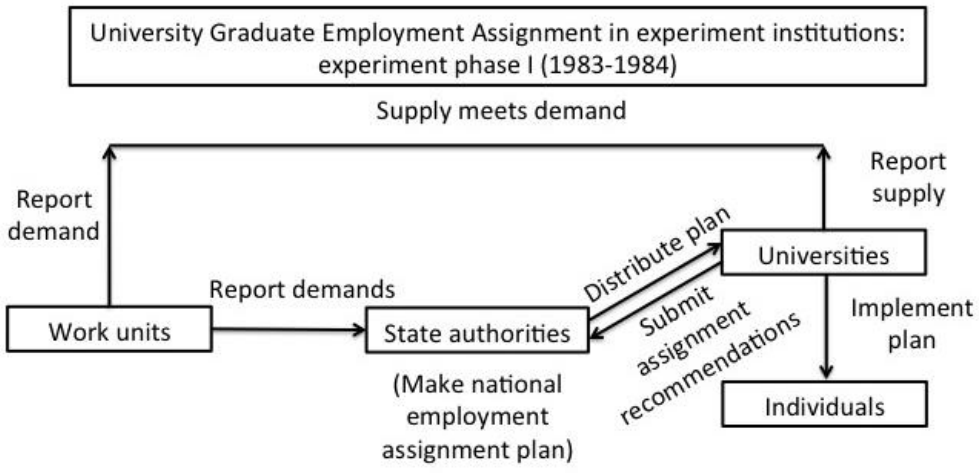


Figure 7 **University graduate employment assignments in China (Experiment Phase I, 1983-1984)**

At the same time, the MoE started to expand the introduction of this 'supply meets demand' approach by making its expanded options available to a certain

proportion of students in twelve majors at ten different universities (*People's Daily*, 1983, May 18). The state's message inspired some universities to initiate changes to their own practices. For example, in 1983, Han Jiang University (a professional college) located in Wuhan city proposed an innovative approach that featured 'fee-charging, non-boarding and no assignment'. This local innovation was highly regarded by the *People's Daily* (1983, July 29).

The state's encouragement and continued efforts to support and expand this experiment reflected the initial success of these experimental changes and their reception among stakeholders. In November 1984, the then Vice Premier Wan Li approved the request from Shirui University and Tongye University to further deepen the experiment. In March 1985, therefore, the two institutions were officially appointed as experiment points approved to explore deeper and more extensive reforms. Their experiments 'went largely hand in hand' – the leaders from the two institutions collaborated and communicated closely as they initiated similar approaches, as recalled by A10, a then Tongye leader who directed its graduate assignment experiment.

The essence of their reforms in this period was to allow 'students to submit their preferences, institutions to make recommendations, and work units to select on a merit basis' (Fang, 2011). With this added flexibility, the universities could make direct contact with the work units, enabling two-way choice (later termed as 'mutual selection'). This expanded approach to 'recruitment, recommendation and selection' created a more autonomous space for the institutions and students to work out assignments on a supply and demand basis while freeing them in part from the political considerations of the state's central planning process. As for the individual students, their choices were still limited, though now at least they were able to express their preferences and later gain the right to meet directly with the work units. Under this new

system, the work units to select their potential employees based on their relative merits, suitability, and talent relative to the other competing candidates.

Based on their experience with these initial reforms, Tongye and Shirui jointly published *Tentative Measures on Graduate Assignment Reform in Year 1985 (*hereafter *Tentative Measures)* and replaced their Graduate Assignment Offices with Career Centres to guide their graduates in making career and employment choices. A10 reflected on their thinking at the time:

> We took a while to consider how to change the traditional way of assignment and to match our supply (of students) with the social demand. We went back to all those contacts as cumulated in the past decades: we wrote to each work unit to ask whether they still needed our graduates, and if so, how many; we then gathered all the information and gave it to students. The process was mainly facilitated through correspondence. We took several rooms with big cupboards and labeled each drawer with a work unit to store correspondence. There were thousands of work units nationwide. It was based on those experiences that we came up with the term 'mutual selection'. This widely used term emerged from local experiments rather than state discourse.

A7, a past leader at Shirui, further added, 'Initially, we proposed a slogan called "mutual selection, no *fen pei* (i.e., no guaranteed job assignment)".' But the MoE reminded them to drop the latter part in case students felt that the country or the university would stop taking care of them at all—the university still had to make recommendations and help students find proper employment, though the student did not have to take it. A7 also noted, 'In a sense, it was still a planned assignment, but it gave the students and work units much more freedom. It introduced an element of competition and choice.' It also greatly helped to align students' majors with employers' needs (Suwen University Party Secretary Office, 1988). Vignette 2 pictures how Tongye University implemented the new mechanism.

Vignette 2: *A University Graduate's Employment Assignment in the System during the experiment*

Vignette 2 'Supply meets demand' and 'mutual selection'[*]

Wang was an undergraduate student at Tongye University (class 1986). In 1985, one year prior to graduation, the university distributed information regarding its graduates (such as disciplines and numbers) to relevant work units nationwide to ask their employment demands for graduates. The experiment in Tongye university, i.e., allowing the university to directly contact work units, had attracted enthusiastic feedback. In a rapidly developing economy, there were huge demands for elite university graduates. The university then compiled the gathered demand information and announced it to its students, including Wang.

Wang's choice, however, was still limited—he could only choose from a range of work units that were considered relevant to his major. During the winter break of 1986, Wang was allowed to sign contracts with recommended work units, but he waited until March. In March, Tongye invited hundreds of work units to the campus. It was the first time that a student could directly communicate with work units to enable fair competition and two-way choice. Wang was allowed to express his preferences, instead of passively accepting whichever job assigned to him. Meanwhile, work units were able to select candidates based on their merits. The university would also make recommendation directly to work units taking into account of students' preferences. Wang decided to go to one particular work unit, and together they submitted their mutual agreement to Tongye University, which would include this information in its assignment plan. Wang reported to his chosen work unit upon his graduation in the same year.

Some of Wang's course mates were less lucky to find proper positions in the job fair. For those who hadn't secured a place then, they could submit their preferences to Tongye, after which the preferred work units would select appropriate employees. For those graduates who hadn't secured a job by mid-April, the institution would report to the Ministry of Education, which would make centralised employment assignment (Zhang, 1988; Fang & Zhang, 2001). Nonetheless, for the first time, students were allowed to meet and select work units directly, instead of 'blind dating' with assigned work positions; the university still played an important role in the process.

* Adapted based on real stories, memoirs and policy documents. For example, see:

From *fen pei* to mutual selection (in Chinese). (2008). Retrieved from http://www.yuloo.com/manager/jy/2008-07-24/101405.html. Accessed 1st April 2017.

In fact, the experiment started even before the two institutions were formally designated as 'experiment points' in 1985. 'Actually, the practice of supply meets demand and mutual selection', as A10 added, 'had already largely been formalised in 1985.' As the respondent reflected on the process: 'The MoE approached us and asked us to experiment first, and only announced it later. I experienced it myself', A10

continued, ‘this is a typical approach to reform in our country – first you find some institutions to try out new measures and only expand them when you think they work.’

It is noteworthy, however, that it was not until 1986 that students were able to directly meet with the representatives from the work units through face-to-face job fairs. At the time, the graduates’ range of choices was still limited based on their majors. As A10 explained, ‘It was our decision, since we wanted our students to be able to use the professional knowledge he/she learned in the university.’ In addition, the graduates’ choices were subject to certain principles mandated by the university and encouraged by the state. For example, the students were encouraged to go back to the places where they came from (i.e., places of birth); the students who came from remote areas were encouraged to return there. Nevertheless, the new, more open approach represented a great improvement for all stakeholders, especially compared to the rigid way employment had been determined in the past. The new employment assignment system benefitted most the students and work units. Figure 8 illustrates the changes that Tongye and Shirui made to the graduate employment assignment system.

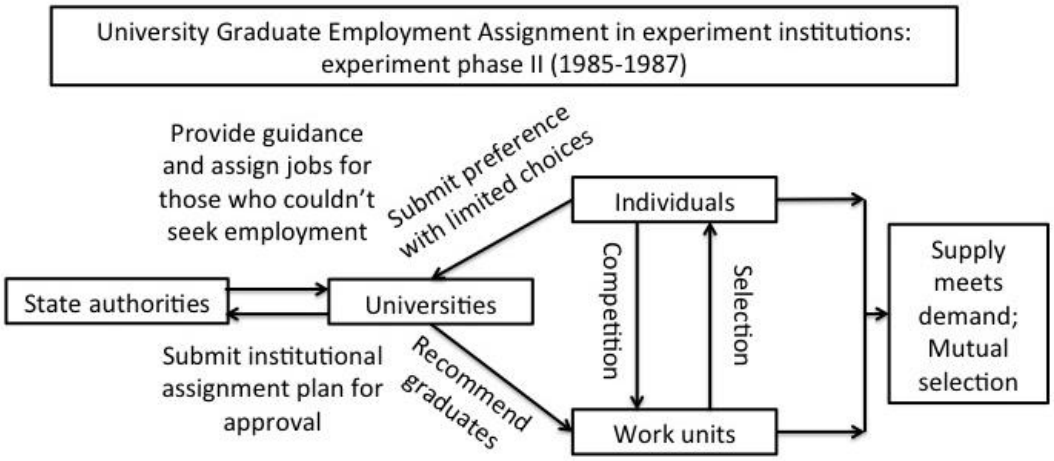


Figure 8 **University graduate employment assignments in China (Experiment Phase II, 1985-1988)**

6.3.3 Interaction: The state-university negotiation process

This 'thick description' of the implementation process offers a picture of how two institutions collaboratively explored and experimented with new ideas and approaches to the university graduate employment assignment system as it had existed since the founding of the New China in 1949. This section discusses the involvement of the state in that process, especially when problems emerged, and describes how the experiment points negotiated the state's interventions.

The experimental phase certainly provided the universities with a top-down, state-initiated reform space for Tongye and Shirui to explore and experiment. As mentioned by several respondents, the state only set a grand objective – namely to explore workable alternatives to the centrally planned employment assignment system for university graduates and to test new approaches to determine what would work best in China's specific but dynamically evolving context (see quotes by A9; A8; A10, A11). As A10 reflected on the relationship:

> The MoE simply let go of control. We were given the rather expanded freedom to explore and reform. In the past we had used a planned approach to assign graduates. We did not want to use it anymore, but we had no idea how to change it. So, we went ahead and experimented… Of course, when a student secured a position, we still had to submit all the relevant information to the MoE and go through all the bureaucratic steps. But there was no framework to restrain our experiment—not even a concrete objective such as 'supply meets demand'. Those phrases came out of our experience, and were later adopted and included in the policy rhetoric. The state's way of supporting our reform was to let us operate as an experiment point without imposing the usual restrictions on us.

Both institutions maintained a friendly relationship with the Ministry of Education (between 1985 and 1998, it was renamed as State Education Commission, SEC) throughout the experiment phase through various channels of communication, such as phone calls, conferences and face-to-face meetings. The MoE's Department of Student Affairs held a series of meetings to guide the experiments in the two institutions (Fang, 2011). Regarding sate-university interactions, B2 later observed, 'The two institutions

discussed what to do and altogether made an appointment with the relevant person in charge in the SEC, and went ahead to discuss the experiment with him.' This great degree of freedom and open strategy space given to the experiment points guaranteed a 'smooth design and implementation' of the changes, A7 commented, 'We did not face a lot of obstacles, at least not from the state.'

However, there was opposition from various parties. For example, certain state officials feared that such changes would cause chaos and disobedience among the graduates (A9). Some expressed concern regarding the suitability and desirability of introducing such dislocating and unsettling changes in China. They worried that there was a lack of matching systems and measures in China at the time to support such changes (Zhou, 1999). The nation was still in the beginning of a reform era, struggling from the transition from a planned economy to a commodity market economy. Those matching systems and measures included the HE system (such as enrollment and fee system), personnel system, *hu ji* system and a maturing labour market that would allow and encourage the more flexible exchange of information, open competition and mobility. This situation determined that the reform could only be achieved by conducting experiments in an incremental fashion – 'keep changing, but in baby steps' (Xia & Cai, 1990), as proposed by the then MoE's director Zhu Kaixuan.

Opposition also came from other universities which were still subject to the national planning and central assignment plan. A9 recalled how they protested the privileges that Tongye and Shirui had as experiment points. The respondent added, 'Some universities thought that we [Shirui University] were included in the experiment because we had a national leader within our university leadership…'

When confronting these opposing voices, the support and continuous recognition of the institutional effort from the state was key (Zhang, 1984). The two

universities took a gradual approach within the institutions, cautiously expanding the new method slowly and assessing the outcome. Moreover, the experiment was well-received among students. They were especially relieved to have the opportunity to exercise at least some control over their lives and careers. In a survey of 303 graduates (out of 1747) who were included in Shirui's experimental reforms revealed that 80.9% of them supported the changes (Yuan, 1988). The evidence of the students' support provided additional evidence for further expansion of the reform efforts.

As the reform process proceeded and expanded, however, a difficulty emerged. In a 'mutual selection' system, market forces increasingly made themselves felt. The students naturally were more inclined to select jobs with higher wages and in better locations (such as in cities along the more developed east coast). As a result, some occupations and work units were not able to recruit a sufficient number of the university graduates who were in the most demand (Xia & Cai, 1990). The respondents who confronted this situation repeatedly mentioned it. It was the point where the state most often intervened.

The state required the experiment points to use various measures to encourage the students to make their own voluntary choices to work in those less desirable places and positions. Those measures included holding seminars, inviting alumni back to promote those places, appealing to the students to honor their obligation to serve their country, and providing students with financial incentives to accept difficult assignments (Yuan, 1988; A10). In addition, the state set restraints on the students' employment choices. At Shirui University, for example, the MoE used the *hu ji* system to curtail the students' choices: those students who came from remote provinces had to go back to those provinces unless the local personnel departments proved that they did not need the specific student to come back. For students who were not originally from city X (where

Shirui University was located) but hoped to stay after graduation, they were subject first to the needs and control of city X. It meant that only a limited number of Shirui's non-X origin students could stay and work in city X upon graduation, as A8 recalled. The interviewee was strongly against this measure, regarding it as a restriction jointly imposed on the mutual selection system by the MoE and X Municipality. The respondent reflected, 'I negotiated with the relevant bureaus and tried to loosen the restrictions. In the end, I managed only to increase the quota given to our institution…'

The state further introduced a special programme called *Ding Xiang* to tackle this problem. More specifically, certain work units entrusted certain HEIs to recruit and educate a specified number of students funded by those work units (instead of the state). Those students had to return to their hometowns/those work units upon graduation. This special programme was generally used in work units located in China's remote areas or those sectors with special needs, such as the nuclear industry (State Education Commission, 1988, Nov 24).

In the beginning of the experiment, the vague political messages and non-interventionist stance taken by the state granted Tongye and Shirui the freedom to create a relatively open and expanded space to explore and experiment. This seemingly top-down experiment was essentially driven by institutional ideas and implementation; the state only entered the picture later as political problems and complications arose. Actors from both the university sector and state sector, regarded the fact that for almost every reform measure introduced, conflicts later naturally arose as the reform process move forward and evolved. It was very much a stop and go, trial and error process. As A10 noted, 'That is precisely why we needed an open atmosphere where we could engage in a continuous process of experiment and adjustment to move our reforms forward'.

6.4 The path to a new university graduate employment assignment (1985-1994)

6.4.1 Gradual incorporation into the national reform process

On March 12nd 1985, the MoE published its *Tentative Measures* (This Day in History, 2008). The method of 'supply meets demand' developed and tested by Tongye and Shirui University was rolled out for adoption among other HEIs (Fang & Zhang, 2001; Yao, 2008). *People's Daily (ren min ri bao),* the official voice of China's Communist Party, publically announced that the CPC had established the goal that around three-quarters of China's universities under the MoE's administration had been directed to develop university graduate employment assignment plans using the 'supply meets demand' approach (*People's Daily*, 1985, March 12).

On May 27th 1985, the publication of the *Decision on the Reforms of China's Educational Structure* (hereinafter the *Decision*) specifically pointed out that the current problem in China's HE was that 'state authorities were too rigid in university affairs, so the universities lack rigour and motivation'. Therefore, 'the key to reforming the higher education system lies in eliminating excessive government control over higher education institutions' in order to 'enhance the autonomy of the institutions' (*Decision,* 1985). This policy document granted the HEIs greater autonomy in university enrollment and graduate employment assignments. Since these systems were clearly linked in China, they both had to change together.

For changes in enrollment, the essence of the change was to combine the state's mandatory plan with an adjustable plan to allow for more freedom in the individual institution's enrollment system (which required a series of reforms in the admission system such as *gao kao*). The enrollment system changed from 'unified admission by the state' to 'admission by the institution'. The new policy also introduced changes to the previously purely state-determined enrollment system.

Similarly, the employment assignment system combined the state's 'mandatory plan' (*zhi ling xing ji hua*) and 'adjustable plan' (*tiao jie xing ji hua*). First, for students enrolled under the state's mandatory plan, their job assignment was determined by the central assignment plan, but students were allowed to submit their job preferences and work units were allowed to select candidates on a merit basis. A certain ratio of students were admitted for pre-determined employers to ensure that there were sufficient graduates for places that were considered generally less desirable. Second, the state further encouraged commissioned admissions sponsored by work units. Students admitted in this category were later assigned to their sponsors upon graduation. Third, the state allowed a small ratio of self-funded students to enter university (*vis-a-vas* state-funded in the mandatory plan). Their employment could be achieved either through institutional recommendation or independent job search (*Decision*, 1985). The *Decision* allowed market forces to develop and gradually formed a labour market (Lewin & Xu, 1989). These policy changes also encouraged a more competitive marketing environment for HEIs: they were allowed to recruit students outside the state plan with a charged fee and produce a labor force engaged in a competitive environment. In the same year, the power of making graduate assignment plans was moved from the SPC to the SEC.

The state, however, remained cautious. Later in July 1985, it published the *Report on Graduate Employment Assignment in Higher Education Institutions in 1985* (drafted by the SPC and SEC; approved and distributed by the State Council). This document specifically emphasised the significance of the state's central employment assignment plan and the importance for graduates to strictly obey the state's assignments.

With the deepening experiments in ‘mutual selection’ at Tongye and Shirui and gradual expansion of the ‘supply meets demand’ method at other universities, the SEC announced its *Notice on Reforming Graduate Assignment in 1988* (State Education Commission, 1988). In this document, the state decided to promote the reform experience of Tongye and Shirui (Cai, 2003). It appointed two other universities (both leading research universities) as experiment points to further test reform measures. The document also encouraged well-prepared institutions to imitate the two universities in implementing a new, more flexible system which permitted students to submit their preferences, institutions to make recommendations, and work units to make their employee selections on a merit basis (though there were no clear criteria for defining what ‘well-prepared’ meant in this context). The SEC decided to gradually try out ‘pre-assignment’ a year in advance (i.e., at the end of the students’ junior year). This document was *de facto* a formal approval of the two universities’ experiments and state-level approval of the ‘supply meets demand and ‘mutual selection’ approaches to university graduate employment assignments (Yao, 2008).

Based on the *Decision* and the experience acquired through the Tongye and Shirui’s experiments, the State Council (1989, March 2) approved and distributed the SEC’s *Report on Reforming Higher Education Institutions’ Graduate Employment Assignment* and *Reform Plan on Higher Education Institutions’ Graduate Assignment*. Following this reform plan, the students who were admitted through the state’s mandatory plan (i.e., recruited through a pre-set state plan and funded by the state) followed the ‘mutual selection’ system, while the students admitted through the adjustable plan (i.e., recruited through commissioned admission and funded by work units; and self-funded students) were encouraged to seek employment themselves. The plan document pointed out that the long-term reform objective was to allow graduates

more autonomy in making employment choices and work units more autonomy in recruitment under national employment guidelines and policies. It was a recognition and reaffirmation of the graduate assignment experiment at the state-level, signaling the shift from a state-centralised job assignment system to a more flexible system for graduates to make their own independent employment decisions. The plan required universities under the SEC's direct administration to implement the new system by 1989 and for all other universities to implement the new system by 1990.

In 1993, the *Outline of China's Education Reform and Development* specifically called for the continued reform of the graduate employment assignment system to build an employment system in which the majority of graduates could seek autonomous employment and the minority of graduates could undertake jobs assigned by the state. It also called for continued reforms to the HE enrollment system and introduced a fee system.

In 1994, the SEC's *Suggestions on Experiments of Further Reform of Higher Education Institutions' Enrollment and Graduates Employment System* (State Education Commission, 1994) specifically stipulated that the state would no longer engage in the administrative assignment of university graduates, but that it would use policies, a scholarship system, and publication of employment information to guide the graduates' autonomous employment decision making. In doing so, the SEC started to merge the previous two tracks (mandatory plan and adjustable plan) through further experiments. The majority of graduates would seek employment based on a market mechanism under the principle of 'mutual selection'. The state asked for the implementation of this change by all HEIs by 1997 and a completion of the transition from an assignment system to a new employment system by 2000 (State Council, 1994).

These policy papers are regarded as tacit *de facto* recognition of the two institutions' experiments, as reflected by several respondents. 'The mutual selection approach we designed was gradually expanded nationwide and set the prototype for other HEIs', A10 noted. However, the new system still had some built-in limitations. For example, it still asked students from remote provinces to go back to those provinces if required. Also, the state retained its power to assign students under the 'mandatory plan'. For example, in 1994, the MoE assigned 6,800 graduates from Type A and Type B universities to 500 work units to solve the latter's urgent demands (Hao & Long, 2000, p. 538). The plan also required universities to include courses that provided guidance to graduates on career planning, hoping to enhance the ideological education of students and encourage them to better balance their individual desires against national needs. These actions reflected the state's continued intervention in the process.

In the planned economy, the university had some power—it could distribute individuals to certain work units within the framework given by the central assignment plan. In the experiment process, the universities were firstly empowered. Various policy documents published in the mid-1980s demanded an enhanced role in university graduate employment assignments. However, the universities' importance was later weakened as the system became more oriented toward choices of the students and the work units. Figure 9 shows the working mechanism of the university graduate employment system during this period.

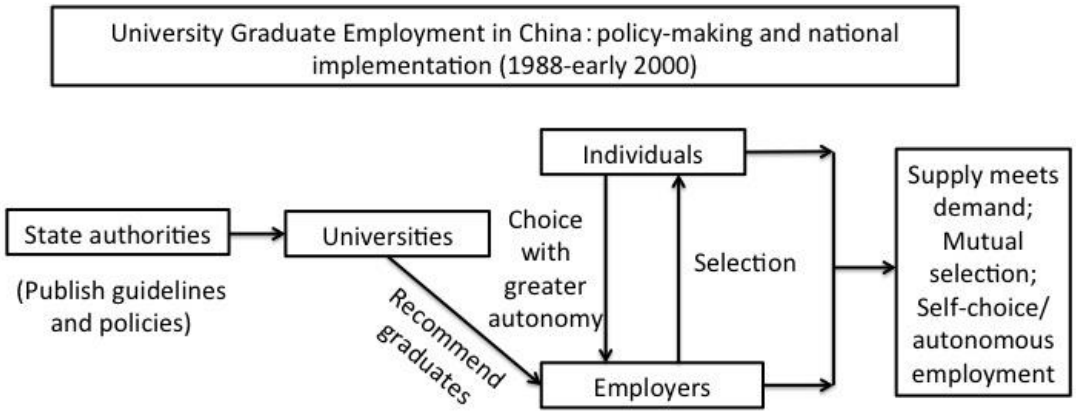


Figure 9 **University graduate employment in China (post-reform, 1988-early 2000)**

In 2002, the State Council published *Suggestions on Deepening the Reform on Higher Education Institutions Graduates Employment System*, in which it confirmed that the principle in the graduate employment system was 'market-oriented, government regulation, university recommendation and mutual selection between graduates and employers' (State Council, 2002). As B2 commented, 'Even though the HEIs were already doing so at the time, this document marked that the practices on the ground and policies coming down from the top had converged.'

From 'supply meets demand' to 'mutual selection', the prolonged reform process was a gradual process carried out through incremental small-scale experiments. It also means that the experiment proceeded concomitantly with expansion. At a later stage, those experiments served both as a test run and as a method for expansion. Table 10 provides an outline of the advancement of these reforms. The gradual expansion clearly fits with Heilmann's framework (2008a) in disseminating a policy innovation: 'local experiments—proceeding from point to surface—national policymaking' (see Figure 1).

Table 10 ***University graduate employment assignment reform: Timeline***

Time		Events and Description	Fit with Heilmann's framework
Phase 0	Pre-1983	There was a centrally planned university graduate employment assignment system, in which the state formulated a central plan to assign university graduates to certain work positions. Students did not have any freedom to choose.	
Phase I (1983-1984)	1983	The state appointed four experiment points, (including Shirui University and Tongye University) to conduct tentative reforms (universities were able to met work units, but could only make recommendations to the national university graduate employment assignment plan)	Phase I: local experiments with the state's support and relatively open strategy space
Phase II (1985-1988)	1985	The state appointed Tongye University and Shirui University as experiment points for further reforms, i.e., 'mutual selection' approach. Students were empowered but there were many limitations.	Phase I: novel policy options generated from local experiments; Phase II: the state's identification and promotion of experimental measures Phase IV: local implementation of concurrent experiment points
	1985	The State Education Commission appraised the efforts of the two experiment points; The *Decision* was published, sending a clear message to reform the university graduate employment assignment system	
	1985-1987	In the experiment points, students and work units met directly; The 'supply meets demand' method was gradually expanded nationwide	
Phase III (1988-early 2000)	1988	The State Education Commission (i.e., the Ministry of Education) further promoted the two institutions' experiments (in particular 'mutual selection') and appointed another two research universities as experiment points to further test such measures	Phase V: decision on expanding experimental measures 'from point to surface' Phase VI: policy formation and enactment Phase VII: policy explication and implementation
	1989	State-level's reaffirmation of the experiment and the publication of a systematic reform plan	
	1988-1993	The 'mutual selection' system was implemented nationwide; Students had greater autonomy and a wider range of choice for employment; but the state reserved rights for employment assignment of certain types of graduates	
	1993-early 2000	Publication of a series of documents to transform the university graduate employment assignment system to a market-oriented employment system featuring autonomous choices and competition	

The transformation from a central assignment system to a modern, market oriented employment system was termed a 'quiet revolution'—one that was peacefully, and arguably slowly, implemented and completed (China Higher Education Academy, 2008, p. 100). The change, however, had a fundamental influence on individual students,

higher education and Chinese society at large. In a way, the state used it as a lever to push other reforms in the higher education sector to better fit with the then rapidly changing Chinese socio-economic situation and university enrolment and teaching practices in particular (for example, the university could use the popularity of its graduates and the employers' feedback on them to demonstrate and further improve its teaching practices). Next section places this experiment into broader social contexts to understand and explain why it was initiated and implemented at the particular time period, and why it was incorporated and expanded in such a prolonged manner as discussed above.

6.4.2 An explanatory account

From the foundation of the PRC in 1949 until the introduction of the CPC's reforms and opening up in 1978, the state exerted absolute control over material and human resources. The 'total state' relied on the social relations guaranteed by rigid and strictly controlled university graduate employment assignment system and an extensive network of thousands of work units nationwide. Moreover, the central university graduate employment assignment system was accompanied by heavy political propaganda and a strong ideological imprint. University graduates were expected to internalise this political message as a moral value—putting the nation's priorities and needs before their own personal priorities and interests. This was a state mandated protocol the university graduates were required to follow without questioning it.

The situation was bound to change with the Deng Xiaoping's official introduction of the Reform and opening-up in 1978. The need for change became clear early on with the radical transformation of the centrally planned Chinese economy and the concomitant emergence of market forces and social factors that were not previously

in play. With the increasing traction of these forces and factors, the previous system of absolute government gradually became untenable and no longer sustainable.

From an individual perspective, there was a growing awareness for individuals to seek more freedom and power from the state. The experimental reforms to the university graduate employment assignment system emerged from and were initiated in this context—a dynamic context driven by both the state's intention and individual demands. This initiative was later regarded as a 'de-nationalisation' of the university graduate employment assignment system (Zhao, 2016).

The successful reform of and incremental implementation of this university graduate employment assignment system initiative and its eventual adoption nationwide can be attributed to several factors:

First, this reform initiative was approached from the start as experimental. The state itself was instrumental in pulling itself back from its position of absolute control in this area. This self-initiated restraint created a limited but relatively free and open strategy space in which the designated experiment points could maneuver, negotiate, and try out innovative policy options without confronting substantial obstacles or unresolvable conflicts of interest. The two universities, working largely in collaboration, used this strategy space to formulate and test worked new measures in a gradual, trial and error fashion tempered by an extensive feedback and evaluation at every step. There was high priority given, again from the start of this process, to make sure that the components of the university graduate employment assignment system platform which Tongye and Shirui were developing would be, with modifications, transferable to and replicable at China's other universities.

Second, the institutional environment at the time was ripe for reform and change. As B7 observed, in retrospect, 'China was in a dynamic transition from a centrally

planned economy to a commodity market economy, and then on to a socialist market economy.' In 1993, the 14th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (NCCCP) asserted that the objective of China's economic reform was to build a socialist market economy. This signalled the importance of using markets as a fundamental/basic force in transforming resource allocation. This dynamic also signalled that a lot of things that were appropriate and suited to a centrally planned system—such as the centrally controlled *Gao Kao* and employment assignment systems suddenly became outmoded. The emerging market forces, especially the impact of an emerging private enterprise sector, inevitably led to a loosening of state control and introduced an environment in which free choice and competition took precedence. As a result of the emergence of these powerful factors, major changes emerged in the relational interactions among individuals (graduates), the universities, the state, society and the work units. This gradual transformation from centrally controlled employment assignment system to decentralised employment system with more individual choice came in the wake of deepening economic and social reforms which provided a conducive institutional environment for them successfully to take hold and gain traction.

Last, the reform of the university graduate employment assignment system was consistent with and a specific expression of the CPC's and the state's 1980's policy planning goal for China's higher education: devolving more power and autonomy to individual universities and gradually transforming the role of the central government.

The incremental transformation of the university graduate employment assignment system came about in an environment which was favourably disposed to concomitant changes broadly evolving in the higher education system. In parallel with the employment assignment system reforms, the higher education system as a whole was being transformed from a state-funded system to a fee based system, from a

centrally planned admission and enrolment system to one which combined a mandatory plan and an adjustable plan. As a later extension of this master plan, higher education, after 1998, was further reformed from a relatively restrictive and elite system to a broader based system offer access to higher education to a greatly expanded market: between 1998 and 2015, China's higher education enrolment more than tripled (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016).

The beginning of HE massification also indicated that university graduates were no longer a 'scarce resource'. Concurrently, the institutional reform of the State Council and State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) starting from 1998 greatly lowered the government's capacity to hire new graduates. All those institutional changes showed that graduate employment was no longer the sole responsibility of the state, but one shared by all the stakeholders—individuals, the state, the university, enterprises and the market.

It should be noted that it was also this dynamic institutional environment that accounts for why this reform and expansion of the university graduate employment assignment system was such a prolonged and cautious process.

In fact, until the early 1990s, 'most graduates nationwide were still assigned through the state's administrative means…there was no fundamental change' (National Academy of Education Administration, 2001, p. 177). It was due to the then imperfect labour market, weak market forces and social actors, a strong state, as well as social configurations and arrangements in China. For example, even with the merging of the state's 'mandatory plan' and 'adjustable plan' in 1997, the state still stipulated that graduate employment assignments should give priority to the industry or region where the university itself was located. The state continued to encourage students who graduated from universities under the administration of the MoE/SEC to seek

employment nationwide, but, at the same time, encouraged students who graduated from universities under the administration of other ministries to seek employment mainly under the direct purview of those ministries (State Education Commission, 1997, March 24). This was subject to the existing HE configuration at the time. Such limitations were only removed after the institutional reform of the State Council that abolished fifteen ministries (Cai, 2003) and reassigned the State Education Commission back to the authority of the Ministry of Education to administer HEIs in 1998.

Due to the complexities of the situation and the prolonged process, the experiment approach of 'learning by doing' and 'expanding through experimenting' proved a useful mechanism. Such a cautious and phased experimental approach is a 'traditional characteristic of higher education as practiced in China' for decades, as noted by A9. Especially in the New China's modern one-party state, the government, unlike Western democracies, does not need to require public debate to initiate and implement reforms like western democracies. 'Our experiment took advantage of various factors given to Shirui, such as the leader's support and local demands. So we went ahead with the experiment', as A8 pointedly observed, 'I would say it was a reform approach with Chinese characteristics—you can still see it now.'

6.5 Summary

This chapter explored a state-sponsored experiment regarding the university graduate employment assignment system (i.e., assigning employment positions to new graduates) primarily designed and facilitated by two experiment points—Tongye University and Shirui University. This experiment, which unfolded more than three decades ago, featured innovative institutional efforts which at the time were radically different for China to ultimately replace the university graduate employment assignment system with limited state intervention in a newly created open strategy space.

Through a ‘thick description’ of the experiment process, this chapter explored the role of the experiment points and their pattern of interaction with the state when they were given relatively open and expanded strategy space created by the state’s ambiguous political messages at the time and incomplete institutional infrastructure which was available to them for implementation. The way in which this case played out reveals, sometimes starkly, the inherent problems in China’s governance structure in the 1980s. It demonstrated how a seemingly top-down policy design could be essentially an often-desperate bottom-up experimental effort to address a potentially debilitating crisis for the country as a whole. The clashes which stemmed from this initiative, though, created a policy crisis which forced the state and its experiment points into a prolonged process of often contentious but ultimately fruitful and constructive iterative interaction. In a very real sense, this case demonstrated the utility of PE in bringing diverse vested interests together to address what appeared to be intractable problems.

This chapter also discussed the state’s rationales and its involvement, especially when problems emerged, and described how the experiment points negotiated the state’s interventions. After being tested and modified, this reformed assignment system was gradually rolled out nationally. This chapter highlighted the significance of institutional environment in the reform process by situating the prolonged experimental effort into the changing social, economic and institutional context of China. Modified many times since, the reformed assignment system has withstood the test of time to become the foundation and prototype for the graduate employment system still used in China today.

Chapter 7. Case III: Building a modern distance education system

7.1 Introduction

Distance education in China has experienced rapid development and substantive changes in the past years. From 2004 to 2015, for example, online distance education has benefited more than ten million students in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016). 'Modern' distance education is promoted by the state as an integral part of China's effort to build a lifelong learning society, achieve educational 'informatisation' and alleviate educational inequality among regions. The term 'modern distance education' is used by the state to distinguish the new system from traditional approaches to distance education. *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* that stipulated 'major efforts shall be made to develop modern distance education…with satellites, television and the Internet as carriers…' (State Council, 2010).

After the foundation of People's Republic of China in 1949, distance education slowly took off. Its initial form was termed 'correspondence education' (*han shou jiao yu*). It was primarily conducted through correspondence: learners studied written course materials, followed by short-term intensive teaching. Another approach to adult education was called 'night college' (*ye da xue*), in which learners took evening classes. They both participated in the National Higher Education Exams for Self-taught Adults for certification. In the 1980s, a new form of distance education was developed using radio and TV broadcasting (Lin, 2008). However, it was still one-way communication: the learners received information with either synchronised teaching or recorded teaching, but they couldn't communicate simultaneously with the course providers.

In 1998, the *Higher Education Law of People's Republic of China* stipulated that 'higher education includes education for academic qualifications and education for

non-academic qualifications. Higher education takes the forms of full-time schooling and non-full-time schooling. The state supports higher education conducted through radio, television, correspondence and other long-distance means' (Article 15). For the first time, the term 'distance education' appeared in the Chinese laws (Lin, 2008).

In March 1999, the Ministry of Education (MoE) appointed four universities as 'experiment points' (*shi dian*) to explore approaches to conducting distance education, signalling the state's intention to commence in China a new era of modern distance education. The MoE subsequently appointed altogether 68 institutions as experiment points to expand the influence of distance education with the publication of relevant regulations. The speed of expansion abruptly slowed, however, after 2002 and hit a pause in 2006. In 2016, only the 68 experiment points were permitted and able to provide formal distance education[12].

Almost two decades have passed since the first four universities were appointed as experiment points; however, the backstory of this seemingly top-down experiment is much more complicated than it appears to be. In fact, it started in 1996 with a single university's voluntary initiative. This chapter explores how this institutional experiment was initiated, implemented, and stumbled its way into the policy process to be scaled up nationally in 1999.

To protect the anonymity of the institution, this institution is referred to throughout as Tanhua University. It is an elite university located in a metropolis in China – a comprehensive research university with a keen focus on the needs of society. It did not have any form of 'corresponding education', which was the trend in China; but it had offered 'night college' courses from the 1950s in response to the state

[12] The policy stipulates that students being educated through online education by the 68 universities, who have reached the relevant requirements, can be awarded with state-recognised degree certificates by the university.

initiatives. The interviewees who are relevant to this case, their positions and designated code in this chapter can be referred to in Appendix IV. The documents relevant to this case include both primary documents such as government policy papers and university yearbooks and secondary literature (see references).

This chapter starts with a thick description of the initiation of this project by Tanhua University and highlights the technological innovations and potential controversies it might have caused (7.2). 7.3 explores, during 1996 to 1999, how the university and the state negotiated and interacted with each other in a consensus-building process (7.3.1). This section explores the strategies and rationales which motivated the major actors, i.e., Tanhua University and the MoE, respectively in 7.3.2 and 7.3.3. The next section, 7.4, briefly touches on the post-1999 period to discuss how the Tanhua's institutional initiative became a national act. It also includes a sub-section outlining how Shannan University, as a comparative case, got appointed as an 'experiment point' in 2000 by the MoE. It illustrates the state's intervention and the universities' responses in this period, and how those factors shaped the results of the experiment (7.4.2). The last section discusses factors influence the experiment outcome, and possibilities for universities to create strategy space for innovative institutional changes (7.4.3).

7.2 An institutional experiment in distance education

7.2.1 The initiation and implementation

In 1994, the then president of Tanhua University visited the National Technological University (NTU) in the United States (US)[13]. At that time, NTU was using satellite transmission to enable distance education (Huffman, et al. 2011). As one participant in the project commented, 'It is the inspiration of this trip that made up his

[13] The National Technological University in the United States offered graduate courses and non-credit courses through satellite, building on the collaboration among many engineering and management colleges and universities in the United States.

mind to innovate distance education in China by using the new technology'. It might be possible that the state discourse at the time also encouraged him. In 1993, the *Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China* pointed out the importance of developing tele-education and encouraged the use of modern teaching technologies.

The president with supporters from the university started to work on developing the idea. In February 1996, the president officially proposed to the university to build a modern distance education system in China (Ding & Wu, 2006). After reaching a consensus within the university, they conducted extensive research and pursued study visits to the US to explore the appropriate form for China. Compared to many western countries at the time, China's internet infrastructure and capacity lagged far behind — China still had not developed its internet capacity to carry distance education effectively and efficiently. Due to rapid nationwide development in cable television and digital satellite transmission at that time, the decision was made to use satellite transmission as the new form of distance education. Later, the University Council passed the *Proposal to Implement the Modern Distance Education Project* (Ding & Wu, 2006). The actual implementation began in June and was largely completed by September (Feng, 2000).

In the spring of 1997, reflected by A13, a key informant in Tanhua's distance education experiment, a tentative system for broadcasting was completed. Tanhua University borrowed a channel from the Xin Hua News Agency, who was then using the AsiaSat2[14] for broadcasting, in order to experiment with its design within the campus. 'When it proved to be successful, we decided to set up the infrastructure…', A13 further noted, 'We built a 4.5 Meter Ku-Band satellite television up-link station on the campus' and in May 'rented a transponder of AsiaSat 2.' That decision proved to be a pivotal step in facilitating the nationwide rollout of the distance education programme.

[14] AsiaSat2 was the only satellite that used Ku-band at the time in China. The others used C-band satellite transmission. C-band's frequency was relatively lower and thus required larger bandwidth. KU-band had a higher frequency to allow digital transmission.

A13 recalled, ‘Some alumni who worked in the telecommunication corporation AsiaSat heard about our initiative and decided to rent the channel to us at half price’. It was important since this institutional initiative did not receive any funding from the state and had to operate on a tight budget.

As a matter of fact, the ‘financial challenge’ was the ‘immediate concern for people in the institution when we proposed the idea at an annual meeting’, as A12, who directed the reform in Tanhua, recalled. All the infrastructure, equipment, satellite-renting research and further operations required financial support. In China in the 90s, the government provided the primary funding for public universities like Tanhua. The then existing distance education system was administrated solely by the government-funded China Central Radio and TV University (now called the Open University of China), which provided courses through the mechanism of radio and television. Since this new initiative was an individual institution’s, there was no government funding available.

Tanhua managed to secure a donation of $1, 500, 000 from Chao Kuang-Piu, a renowned Hong Kong industrialist. A12 recalled the process of flying to Hong Kong to discuss this initiative with Mr. Chao. ‘He decided to donate half of the amount we needed right away, and later that night, he called me saying that he could donate all the money we needed so we did not have to look elsewhere’. The respondent believed that Mr Chao’s supportive philanthropic gesture came from his belief that ‘this experiment would benefit the whole society in the long run’. This amount of money relieved some uneasiness within the campus, and allowed Tanhua to rent the satellite channel required and to buy the necessary equipment to begin making transmissions (Wu, Wu & Sun, 2015).

This new modern distance education system included three networks, referring to the three mediums used in the process, i.e., satellite television, cable television network, and the Internet (Hu et. al, 2002). The three networks 'provided three new methods for distance education learning', A16, who directly involved in the experiment, pointed out.

The informant further specified how learners could watch learning modules through satellite television. Learning modules broadcasted live in Tanhua's campus (such as teaching videos, multimedia courseware, and other learning materials) were transmitted through the AsiaSat2. By using the dedicated channel (Ku-band), the network transmitted those materials (videos, audios, images, texts, etc.) to satellite campuses established to receive the broadcasts. This provided a relatively broad coverage for users; even remote areas of China were able to build receiving stations. However, the learners had to gather at a specific place to watch the satellite TV broadcasts.

Second, it transmitted learning modules via satellite to the cable television network 'by using a digital compression technology, which was just beginning to be developed in China', reflected a technician involved in the project. In this case, the courses could be delivered to every household with cable television. This method was cheaper, and more convenient and flexible for the individual learner. 'It further broke the space restrictions', noted A16 in reflecting on the benefit of this method.

Another way was to use the emerging Internet. The Internet was still in its initial development stage in China—rural areas either didn't have internet access or suffered from insufficient bandwidth and slow transmission speeds. The Internet was also more expensive at the time for individuals. Despite these obstacles, Tanhua was able to construct a nationwide network. It firstly launched a distance education website, which

was further developed into an online platform for teaching and learning, allowing for asynchronised teaching and two-way communication. ‘But all those were all at a later stage’, as A15, another informant, reflected, ‘the Internet didn’t play an important role in the initial period’.

7.2.2 A technological innovation

What were the breakthroughs of the Tanhua’s initiative? The first innovation was to ‘use modern technologies to enable two-way communication’. This type of real time interactive communication was not available before, as recalled by several interviewees. As mentioned above, the traditional communication mediums, i.e., radio, television, correspondence—were one-way passive teaching and learning mechanisms. Satellite broadcasting allowed for two-way communication, so courses could be broadcast from a university campus to satellite campuses around the country established to receive the broadcasts. The students were able to communicate directly with their course instructors. Facilitated by the availability of advanced technologies for the digital compression of course materials, the new distance education system could be built around a theoretically limited network of virtual classrooms designed to meet local needs. The availability of this technology greatly expanded the scope at the receiving end of distance education, with the greatest benefit according to the most remote areas. Learners had the flexibility to choose the most suitable mode of learning at lower cost and with greater efficiency.

The use of mixed technologies was mainly due to China’s status quo in the late 1990s—the sponsors needed to give careful consideration to balancing coverage and cost. In addition, course materials were compressed and transmitted via digital transmission, marking the realisation of another innovation in this experiment. Previously, course materials had to be transmitted using the more restricted analogue

transmission mode. Digital transmission allowed for internet transmission and greatly expanded capacity.

The two innovations were mainly technological. The technical challenge was one of the most prominent obstacles Tanhua had to overcome at the beginning of this initiative. The staff had to design and build the set-top box for satellite transmission and reception and create a new matching system for distance education, and other supporting equipment from scratch. Clearly, technology was at the heart of this initiative. Luckily, Tanhua was uniquely equipped to face this challenge because it had a long tradition of being heavily focused on science and engineering. Consequently, the technical resources the university needed were readily accessible on campus.

7.3 The consensus-building process

With all those technological and financial preparation in place, the experiment didn't start right away. This was mainly due to the administrative challenge featured by the MoE's strong opposition to this institutional innovation, which proved to be the most difficult to tackle. Using a satellite to broadcast programs inevitably involved potential risks and warranted careful assessment from the government to ensure political stability and 'national security' (Wu et al., 2015, p. 107). Hence, Tanhua University needed to acquire the relevant certificate from the State Radio Regulatory Commission (SRRC) of the People's Republic of China to build the satellite earth station and to legally broadcast through the satellite. The SRRC required the institution's superior, i.e., the MoE, to show its approval in order to grant the certificate. It is because that under the administrative arrangement of China, those public universities operate under the direct administration of the MoE need to report to the MoE; on the other hand, the MoE is held responsible for their actions.

However, the MoE declined to do so. It also refused to grant the legitimate status of the courses offered by Tanhua, and even constantly called a stop to the project. Against this situation, this section reconstructs the implementation of this project by exploring how the university interacted with various state bureaucracies to negotiate a consensus. It is followed by a discussion on the university's motivations of this initiative and the rationales of the MoE for its initial stand.

7.3.1 The power negotiating process

Tanhua used three strategies to interact and negotiate with its administrative authorities to create the necessary space it needed to push this initiative forward.

Bypassing the MoE

When the normal path hit a dead end, Tanhua turned to the Beijing Radio Regulatory Commission (BRRC) and managed to persuade the BRRC to issue a certificate. An interviewee (A13) reflected on how this came about:

> They [BRRC] believed that what we did was good—it was for a good cause, and an established higher education institution like Tanhua would not engage in any activities that would endanger national security. So they gave us the certificate without further questioning.

Hence, Tanhua legally acquired permission to broadcast by satellite. Because the SRRC believed that Tanhua was also subject to 'territory management', so it subsequently recognised the certificate issued by the BRRC. In this way, the university bypassed the MoE to get administrative permission to use the satellite to broadcast its programmees.

Tanhua was able to do that even though it was under the direct administrative supervision of the MoE due to China's fragmented administrative system. As discussed in Chapter 4, the *tiao-kuai* integration represents China's two-dimension arrangement (functional and territorial systems of governance). In this system, a university located in city B would be subject to both functional management and territory management: it might be required to report to both the MoE and the local government (branches). In

turn, either party would have the authority to issue the relevant administrative permission for the university's actions. Tanhua used this governance structure tactfully to acquire the necessary certificate to support its controversial initiative.

Making use of the current policy

Tanhua still needed MoE's recognition of the program, however, to legitimate the process. With this recognition still under negotiation, Tanhua strategically used an existing policy to start to offer non-degree postgraduate courses and trainings in 1998. The policy allowed 'whoever with an equivalent education level to master's[15] can sit the national exam and be awarded a master's degree upon passing'. A13 reflected how this strategy worked:

> We wanted to offer the courses and training first, and let those people sit for exams afterwards so the MoE cannot intervene anyway. The procedure was very simple and straightforward. We recorded our master's courses in three majors, i.e., law, economy and management, and computer science—we believed these were in great demand. Those recorded materials were transmitted nationwide. After taking those courses for two years, the students could sit for the respective national exams for postgraduates, which was open to everyone, so the MoE couldn't ban them from taking part. Upon passing the exam, the students would be qualified as candidates for equivalent education level as masters. They then could start writing their theses like 'normal' master's students. If successful, they would be awarded their master's degrees.

In this way, Tanhua was able to jumpstart its experiment while continuing to negotiate as required with the MoE for legitimation.

Appealing to high-level leaders

Several interviewees from the university recalled the administrative pressure they faced during this consensus-building process. Not only was the initiative 'not being recognised', it was 'called to a stop repeatedly' (Wu et al., 2015, p. 108). Some informants recalled having arguments with MoE officials about the project, trying to

[15] 'Equivalent education level' (*tong deng xue li*) in the Chinese context refers to the situation when a person doesn't have a formal degree from a higher education institution, but is equipped with the knowledge and expertise equivalent to this level. To allow people with equivalent education level to sit the exam, conduct viva exam and acquire a formal degree is part of the national scheme to encourage on-the-job graduate programmes and learning.

persuade them about the significance of this experiment and Tanhua's ability to take responsibility to keep the potential threat to national security to a minimum. As A12 recalled, he heard claims from certain officials who dismissed the project out of hand: 'leave them alone, they will just fail eventually anyway.' Against this stonewalling from some MoE officials, the Tanhua leaders took a critical step—they appealed over the heads of the MoE to seek the support of higher-level government leaders.

On the 20th November 1997, the then Vice Premier of the State Council happened to visit Tanhua University. He was accompanied by many state officials, including some from the MoE. During his visit, he was persuaded by the Tanhua representatives to visit the new site on campus for their distance education centre. He regarded very highly Tanhua' pioneering efforts to build modern distance education (Feng, 2000; Wu et al., 2015). 'We had already mentioned our experiment to him before since he was the Vice Premier in charge of educational matters', A13 vividly recalled that day, 'this time we felt great pressure from the MoE, so we were also looking for an opportunity to gain his support'. As A13 added, 'He believed that it was the right path for developing higher education for a big and poor country like China'. His appraisal and approval was a turning point in the project and helped to shift the MoE's attitude.

With hindsight, this turning point sounds like 'a lucky coincidence'. The Vice Premier's visit happened, as A12 noted, just a couple days after there had been a fierce argument between Tanhua and the MoE. Tanhua had been looking for a 'space' to utilise for developing this experiment. As A12 later recalled, Mr Chao Kuang-Piu was also believed to have used his personal relationship with high-level leaders to grease the wheels: 'He was aware of the administrative pressure we were facing, so he wrote directly to the then state minister, who then expressed support for the project after gathering more information about it'.

As several interviewees, including university actors, state actors and scholars, commented, for an experiment like this one to proceed and succeed, support from leaders and government was key (such as A13; B1; C1; C2; C3). In this case, the Vice Premier's words legitimised the whole experiment and resolved the conflicts between the university and the MoE', A13 commented. It helped with the further recognition by the government. Tanhua benefited from this strategy largely due to its unique status as one of the best universities in China. It had extensive networks of support within and outside the government (especially with its alumni). It also benefitted from its own extensive resources and a tactful way of appealing for support. It also had to do with the importance of having high-level leaders on your side in any policy context in general—but especially in China where *Guan Xi*[16] has always been crucial.

In the spring of 1998, the then Minister and vice ministers of the MoE successively paid visits to Tanhua University and expressed their support for its experimental project. In the past, they were reluctant to visit Tanhua for this purpose since in the Chinese context it would have been considered as a gesture of endorsement. These visits and their tacit endorsement helped to pave the way for the later integration and adoption of this institutional experiment into national education policy.

7.3.2 The Ministry of Education's position and its rationale

One may wonder, if this experiment was that beneficial, why was the MoE so opposed to the idea in the first place? This subsection explores the MoE's possible rationales for its initial opposition to the project.

[16] *Guan Xi* refers to connections and relationships among individuals in the society. It is a critical element in the Chinese society, describing the dynamics in personalised networks and their mutual influence.

Concern for stability

The MoE's most legitimate reason was that since Tanhua's approach involved satellites and thus could potentially endanger national security and cause social unrest. A14, who had direct experience with this initiative, commented, 'The MoE did not want to take responsibility since it had direct authority and responsibility for Tanhua'.

Some didn't clearly understand the complicated procedure involved in the implementation of the experiment. They feared that it might undermine education quality and interfere with China's existing educational order. As A12 noted,

> The MoE should have come up with this initiative to innovate our distance education at the time, but they didn't—that's bad enough. We came up with the idea, and they still didn't want us to proceed just because they were afraid that changes would lead to an unstable situation, and they didn't want to be held accountable.

This had to do largely with the Chinese people and in particular bureaucrats' entrenched idea of 'ensuring stability as the overriding need and principle' promoted by Deng Xiaoping, China's former paramount leader.

Conflict of interests

At the time, the China Central Radio and TV University operated the singular platform available to provide distance education in China. It was also the only institution permitted to use satellites for such purposes. It was suspected by A14 that the MoE hoped to keep the exclusive privilege for using satellite to broadcast to the China Central Radio and TV University alone – allowing Tanhua to do so would inevitably undercut its importance and status. A13 commented:

> The MoE wanted to protect the China Central Radio and TV University, and the China Central Radio and TV University also opposed Tanhua's experiment quite strongly. They knew that it could not compete with us. It couldn't provide teaching materials—it was only a platform, with a central institution and various institutions at the provincial and local levels to gather educational resources provided by other universities and broadcast them through satellites.

With extending the distance education privilege to Tanhua and possibly other universities, it was feared at the MoE that the China Central Radio and TV University might not survive against such direct competition. Consequently, the MoE did not want other universities to be able to use the satellite to do distance education, as pointed out by several interviewees (A12; A13; A14). The experiment also went against the MoE's strategic plan for distance education at the time. 'The MoE wanted to gather and integrate all the required educational resources on a unified platform rather than have each individual university administer its own distance education', as noted by C2, a scholar and university practitioner working in distance education.

The MoE was supposed to administer the platform through the China Central Radio and TV University. It was suspected that MoE was opposed to Tanhua's initiative because it believed that it should be the main agent for carrying out such a project. As C3, another academics, noted, 'The MoE thinks it should be in charge of the project of such nature'.

Individual opinion

It is worth noting that several interviewees believed that there was 'no fundamental difference or conflict' in the stance taken by Tanhua or the MoE (A12; B1; C1; C2). They believed the differences and conflicts resided more at the individual level rather than the institutional policy level. The major opposition to the Tanhua's initiative came from particular individuals at the MoE rather than from the institution itself. C3 reflected:

> After all, it had something to do with how certain leaders at the MoE saw things and dealt with things—it was not necessarily an irreconcilable conflict between institutional intention and the state's policy. As a matter of fact, the MoE was not monolithic – sometimes the Minister would support a task, but some division chiefs refused to go along with him. That was very common. It all came down to how you dealt with the conflicts and discrepancies and worked for more space to develop your idea.

Some people at Tanhua pictured—half jokingly, half seriously—the relationship between Tanhua and the MoE in institutional experiments as a three-step process: 'Every time we want to try something new, the MoE always goes against the idea. It has to go through three stages: rejection; acquiesce; and approval' (A12; A13; A15). A13 further explained:

> The administrative departments in China are always quite reluctant to accept institutional initiatives because they have to be held accountable for the outcome, but if the institution sets its mind to do so, it may be able to utilise resources to tackle all kinds of challenges to continue its cause until the state acquiesces in and later supports the experiment…this seems counterintuitive to people's general impression of China as a highly politicised and hierarchical country, but there are many spaces left for interpretation, negotiation and operation. The distance education experiment was a typical example.

However, a state official strongly rejected this 'three-step' statement, claiming that he has never heard of such a three-stage process: 'it is an overgeneralisation of the MoE's behaviour and it is not accurate' (B1).

7.3.3 The university's position and its rationale

This section discusses the possible rationales behind Tanhua's initiation of and commitment to this project beyond the financial, technological and administrative challenges. It also explores how the university's institutional behaviour nested in the bigger picture of China's development at the end of the 20th century.

Technology-driven initiative

The modern concept of distance education has its roots in the rapid development of technology that has made it even possible. For many decades, scholars and practitioners had been actively looking for ways to use the latest technology to increase efficiency in education. In this case, technology played a critical role and a main driving force. Some professionals referred this experiment as a 'technology-driven' reform.

For one factor, the president of Tanhua University, was intimately familiar with much of the relevant technology that could be adapted for distance education functions,

i.e., using digital technology to code, transfer and decode the course materials for individual households through multiple platforms. The knowledge opened up the possibility of Tanhua's experiment. The subsequent operations were also technology driven.

In an interview, A12 commented, 'The technology itself was not an innovation—it was more a question of how to adapt and apply the latest technology to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of China's educational reality'. It was a considerable advantage in this effort that the institution had a long history and tradition of being committed to applying engineering and technology to the solving of social problems. In fact, it was one of Tanhua' core embedded values. The univeristy's embedded culture helped to promote their interest and commitment to this project. As A14 reflected, 'It may be one of the reasons why Tanhua got interested in this initiative in the first place. They are always highly motivated to explore how technology can be used to create a strong social impact.'

Social demands

The most direct purpose of the Tanhua initiative was to provide training for personnel in China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs). At the time, China had a great need to update and improve the knowledge and skills of the people who held important positions in the state, especially in the SOEs. 'Obviously, it was impossible to bring everyone back to school, but the social need to provide further training and education to SOEs' managers, businessmen and state officials was quite high at the time', noted by A12, 'Meanwhile, they were especially attracted to studying at such a prestigious institution as Tanhua'.

In response to the strong social demand, A12 continued, 'We wanted to find ways to provide courses to them and to help those SOEs to retain and train talents while

allowing them to stay on the job'. This explicit social need was the most direct driving force behind Tanhua's initiative. 'It was why our initial target was those SOE managers,' A14 noted. The program started with on-the-job training and master-level courses in the three most needed disciplinary areas, i.e. law, economy and management, and computer science.

A sense of mission

All the Tanhua interviewees repeatedly emphasised how the initiative was, from the very beginning, an institutional response to the 'needs of the country and the time'. At the end of the 1990s, higher education resources were still relatively scarce. The growing public demand created a tension that Tanhua was hoping to address through distance education. Tanhua hoped, by adapting modern technology, to share its educational resources with the public in a more effective and efficient way. In part, they wanted to reduce the then severe inequalities in education in China. As A13 pointed out, 'The leverage was provided by technology, but the deeper motivation was to expand the availability of quality educational resources to enhance education equality. Technology provided a means to this end'.

This mission-driven feature was more evident during the interaction and negotiation process between Tanhua and the MoE, especially early on when the initiative faced stiff opposition and resistance from the MoE. It was particularly difficult due to China's hierarchal system and its highly politically charged environment. Some leading figures in this experiment reflected on how their belief in this initiative played a critical role in the process, driving them to devote themselves to the project and to utilise their resources to attract support. A13's response was telling:

> To persuade people and build a consensus within the campus in the beginning, I wanted people to consider what they would do if there were no financial or administrative difficulties. They all shared the belief that it was our

> responsibility, as a state-owned institution, to share our resources to the wider public, especially when there was such a high demand from society.

A self-interest attempt?

It was suspected that the Tanhua initiative was a strategic move driven by consideration of its own self-interest: to enhance its own internet and technological infrastructure building and construct an unrivaled educational information platform. As C4, an established scholar, commented, 'The focus may not have been distance education as such, but rather how Tanhua used distance education as leverage to acquire for itself a competitive advantage as China entered the impending IT age'.

It may also be that Tanhua hoped to 'benefit itself in the process by building a larger and more powerful alumni network' (A13). *Guan xi* plays a strong traditional role in Chinese society, so the university's alumni network has an incalculable intangible value. Before the 90s, Tanhua University already had developed an extensive alumni network, with its alumni holding influential positions in every sector across the nation. With the development of HE internationalisation after the Reform and Opening-up, more and more of its alumni went abroad and stayed there. Hence, when a great number of state officials, SOEs technicians and managers, and businessmen hoped to study at Tanhua, it may have been perceived by some university leaders as 'a good opportunity to influence those people with Tanhua's institutional imprint, thus bolstering a powerful alumni network to partially compensate for the loss of many of our native alumni' (A13).

As it turned out this was not, in this case, the most important factor behind the Tanhua initiative. In China, the MoE held the absolute authority to allocate the majority of education resources to public universities like Tanhua. If self-interests had been the most important driving force, it would have been irrational and unwise for Tanhua to

irritate the MoE or its officials because it would have run the risk of endangering their resources allocation and policy preference in the future.

External driver

According to interviewee C2, the Tanhua initiative was not simply an individual institution's idea that came out of the blue. At the end of the 20th century, scholars and practitioners were actively looking for ways to further integrate information technology and education to promote educational innovation. The Tanhua initiative, in this sense, was 'an institutional response to the cumulative effect of the ongoing scholarly research within Chinese universities in that period, and the state's policies provided stimulation for this experiment' (C2).

The presence of the national centre of a state sponsored national internet network at Tanhua contributed to the formation of this initiative, according to some scholars, providing both the inspiration of the initial strategic planning and necessary infrastructure. Though Internet was part of Tanhua's 'three networks' plan, the people who were responsible for the technological design and implementation reflected that it hadn't played an important role at all since at the time the Internet was too slow to transmit videos, let alone supporting distance teaching and learning. 'It is an integral part of distance education now, but it was not so in the 1990s' (A13). In addition, most of the participants reflected that there was no any policy influence before 1996. Most respondents acknowledged that the Tanhua's president's trip to the US and subsequent study visits certainly provided the initial inspiration and model for the Tanhua initiative, but there was no comparable domestic influence like that.

7.4 From an institutional initiative to a national act

This section explores the salient factors which might influence how the Tanhua institutional experiment gradually became a state-advocated act beginning in 1999. In the second part of the section, the researcher discusses visits to Shannan University, an institution which the MoE designated as an 'experiment point' in modern distance education in 2000. Building on the Shannan example, the section further discusses how the state-university interactions changed after the distance education model was rolled out nationally. In this regard, this section explores the role and nature of policy experimentation (PE) in the reform process.

7.4.1 Policy influence and another experiment point

The Vice Premier's visit and support in 1997 had created a sea change in the MoE's attitude to the distance education experiment. It happened to coincide with the time during which the MoE was drafting the *Action Plan for Educational Revitalization to Face the 21st Century (*hereinafter the *Action Plan).* The final policy document, published at the end of 1998, officially stated that one of the objectives of China's education was to build the capacity for 'modern distance education'. In the 1998 *Suggestions on Developing Modern Distance Education*, the MoE called for the use of new technologies in this respect (Ministry of Education, 1998, May). It specifically pointed out that the focus was to 'reform the existing satellite television network using the Ku-band and digital compression technology, and build a mixed-medium, interactive modern distance education system'. These clearly aligned with the Tanhua experimental efforts. As A12 and A13 both noted, all those policy documents were certainly a recognition of their initiative.

Against this background, the MoE appointed four universities in 1999 as experiment points to explore ways to build a modern distance education system

(Ministry of Education, 2003)[17]. The selected four universities had different resources and priorities and therefore their tasks were intentionally differentiated to experiment various technological means in varied environments for their viability in distance education. For example, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications was expected to use its Posts and Telecommunications system (TM system) to implement distance education while Zhejiang University was expected to use its provincial broadcasting system (Zong, 1999). The MoE subsequently appointed a series of experiment points to expand the scope of reform as well as the privilege of developing distance education (Table 11). It also published various policies, providing guidelines and/or regulations for the operation of those experiment points.

For this case, the researcher further conducted fieldwork at Shannan University (pseudonym), an elite university located in the western part of China. It was one of the early state-appointed 'experiment points' (in 2000) to engage in building modern distance education system. The purpose of this section is to illustrate how different institutions responded to and interacted with the state during this experimental development phase.

It started as an official experiment point appointed directly by the MoE, but the result was in fact came from the institution's proactive appeals to be included in this initiative. 'We thought it was something new and good—an opportunity to promote educational information construction, and we wanted to get on board', as A16 explained, 'We also thought it could help promote other reforms on campus'. But Shannan's targeted audiences and approach were quite different from Tanhua's. It primarily aimed to serve its province, the west and the minorities. So, it mainly employed the provincial conference system since the Internet was still too slow at that time.

[17] China Central Radio and TV University (now called the Open University of China) was also appointed as an experiment point. However, as a specialised university, its tasks and challenges were different from general higher education institutions; therefore, it is not included in this study.

Table 11 ***State-appointed experiment points for modern distance education reform***

Year	Number (new)	Experiment points
1999	4+1	Tsinghua University, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Zhejiang University and Hunan University; China Central Radio and TV University
2000	26	Beijing University, Beijing Normal University, Northeastern University, Tianjin University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, South China University of Technology, Fudan University, Renmin University of China, Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Tongji University, Southeast University, Jiangnan University, Shandong University, Sun Yat-sen University, Sichuan University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Chongqing University, Beijing Institute of Technology, Northeast Agricultural University, Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, Communication University of China, Beijing Language and Culture University, Central China Normal University and Lanzhou University
2001	14	East China Normal University, China University of Petroleum (East China), China Agricultural University, Central South University, Xiamen University, Southwest Jiaotong University, Fujian Normal University, Southwest University, Nankai University, Jilin University, China University of Geosciences (Wuhan), Donghua University, Wuhan University of Technology, and Harbin Institute of Technology
2002	22	University of Science and Technology Beijing, University of International Business and Economics, Central Conservatory of Music, Wuhan University, Beihang University, Dalian University of Technology, Nanjing University, China Medical University, Dongbei University of Finance and Economics, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine, Zhengzhou University, East China University of Science and Technology, South China Normal University, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Sichuan Agricultural University, Northwestern Polytechnical University, University of Science and Technology of China, Xidian University and Shaanxi Normal University
2003	1	Northeast Normal University
2006	1	China University of Petroleum (Beijing)

Source: Jiao, 2009.

At the beginning of the experiment, Shannan enjoyed a great degree of autonomy along with other experiment points. Gradually, however, it felt the MoE's tightening grip as problems emerged with the rollout and expansion of this experiment. A comparison from the respondents from the two institutions clearly showed the different mindsets of the people involved. The Tanhua leaders were more proactive, more determined to follow-up and carry out their beliefs. They were less intimidated by the MoE and the administrative authorities. In contrast, the Shannan University people

appeared to be more reserved and more responsive to the state's demands. For example, one respondent from Shannan believed, 'Of course we could not do anything that was not approved by the MoE…you cannot do anything without their support and you shouldn't go against them' (A16).

7.4.2 State intervention and university response in a new system

This section discusses the state's intervention in the post-1999 period and the results of this experiment after the state broadly expanded the number of participating experiment points.

From 1999 to 2001, the state assumed an aloof and distance stance. It allowed the experiment points to enjoy an unusually high degree of freedom (Li, 2008)—'unprecedented degree of autonomy', as termed by C1. They enjoyed the privilege of making distance education available with independent admission criteria (they could decide who and how many), administration (e.g., set prices for courses), examination and graduation (organise exams and issue graduate certificates).

In this period, the MoE issued ad hoc regulations to guide the development of modern distance education instead of opting for direct intervention. For example, in 1999, the MoE published the *Comments on Commencing Policy Experiment on Modern Distance Education among the First Group of Higher Education Institutions.* These guidelines set the objectives and tasks for experiment points in exploring plausible ways for developing and building China's modern distance education capacity. In 2000, the MoE issued an *Interim Administrative Measure on Education Websites and Online Schools* (Ministry of Education, 2000). This publication was viewed as an effort by the MoE to reassert its management control over and leadership position in distance education (Li & Tang, 2007). Later the MoE required the experiment points to submit regular reviews to the local education authorities.

The high degree of autonomy and an unoccupied free market caused some problems, though, which resulted in many cases where distance education learners were over-charged by certain institutions and there were irregularities in the admission process (A14; A15; C1; C2). In response to these problems, the MoE gradually began to tighten its oversight and supervision of the emerging distance education market in 2001.

In August 2001, the MoE published an urgent regulation covering the admission procedures to be applied for modern distance education. It pointed out specifically that only state-appointed experiment points were allowed to recruit students: 'This document re-emphasised the privileged position of those experiment points' (C1). Later, the MoE issued another series of documents to clarify, review and regulate the work of the experiment points.

In August 2002, the MoE published another document which issued guidelines for regulating teaching quality at experiment points in online distance education. It also specifically required institutions to gradually stop recruiting high school students to be directly admitted to undergraduate-level programmes and primarily focus on in-service personnel. It was a clear indication that the MoE was rapidly tightening its monitoring and control of the rapidly developing distance education market.

In 2003, the MoE issued a further series of regulatory documents and held relevant conferences on the work of experiment points. The MoE's core message was that it wanted the experiment points to focus on the steady development and enhance regulation of existing programmes. Meanwhile, the MoE called a halt to the rapid expansion of experiment points. In January 2004, the MoE announced that it would start to administer nationwide examinations of distance education learners in certain subjects in 2005. Later, in a series of published decrees, the MoE tightened national standards for admission, graduation and the building of off-campus distance education centres.

All those policy documents show that the MoE was reasserting its centralised power and taking back many of the powers it had previously given to the local experiment points. As A12 noted, 'This signaled the end of the rapid, decentralised development modern distance education in China'.

Promulgating a tide of new regulations was an important way for the state to intervene in the experiment. It differed from the previous period when such experiment has been an institutional initiative relatively independent from the state's mandate. The change from loose supervision to tight regulation was a response to the increasingly evident problems that accompanied the expansion of this experiment. In fact, the purpose of some of these policies and regulations was more than regulatory. An important change was brought about by MoE's regulations to encourage all participating institutions to conduct degree-level programs. It was suspected that 'they [i.e., the MoE] hoped to use this as a way to increase the overall higher education enrolment rate' (C1), which was a primary goal in China at the end of the 20th century.

In response, most experiment points started to operate degree-related programmes, including Shannan. Tanhua tried to resist doing so since the original design of its program was based on master-level courses and on-the-job training. But Tanhua was pressured to join the trend: 'When we saw all the other universities were offering degree-related programmes, we felt we had to as well', A13 recalled.

But several unanticipated problems emerged due to this change. All participating universities were high-level research universities in China. From their shared perspective, distance education was traditionally considered to be a lower end effort. The existence of degree-granting distance education programmes went against those universities' visions and missions and distorted the prevailing hierarchy and stratification among higher education institutions in China. Moreover, it had a negative

influence on vocational and professional colleges and private universities. Their traditional pool of students was attracted away to the distance education programmes offered by research universities. As C2 carefully observed, 'Those vocational colleges filed complaints with the MoE, and the MoE further complained to us. It messed too much which the existing structure'.

The biggest protest came from those within the experimental institutions, as reflected by several respondents (A14; A15; C1; C2). Many research university students perceived it as unfair to allow those who couldn't get admission through the national college entrance examinations to acquire the same degree as they could. The faculties and alumni also expressed concern about the possible dilution of education quality and the reputation of their universities. The problems got even worse when some newly participating experiment points put financial gains at the core of their operations by admitting too many students while not maintaining their academic standards as promised. As C2 noted,

> Some universities joined the experiment because they saw an economic opportunity. Since the MoE had given the experiment points a special policy to allow them decide the number of students they can admit and tuition fees, which is not even possible for higher education institutions nowadays.

Faced with these problems, Tanhua decided to discontinue its degree-level programs, and revert to 'high-end training'. It admitted its last cohort of the degree-related distance education in 2002. 'It became quite clear to us that the decision to be involved in degree programmes was a mistake,' reflected by A13. The whole experiment was spreading too fast without careful planning. A12 echoed the appraisal:

> Our initiative may be regarded as having been successful, but there should have been more planning to support the expansion phase, because expanding an innovation is more complicated—there are multiple institutions with different resources and priorities, thus involving more severer conflicts of interests.

Shannan University, on the other hand, is still operating its degree-related distance education.

Another noticeable way of state intervention in the experiment was the establishment of a special 'civil organisation' called the 'Chinese Universities Modern Distance Education Collaborative Group' (hereinafter the Collaborative Group) in 2000. It was built under the direction and guidance of the MoE. Its objectives are to ensure that the experiment points were self-disciplined and self-regulating and to act as the spokesman for the MoE. To this end, the MoE required the experiment points to regularly report to the Collaborative Group about their status, C1 pointed out that, 'From its very beginning, the organisation acted as a means for state intervention, though its legal status is highly ambiguous – it is not a government department, nor is a legal person'. Nevertheless, it regularly holds seminars, submits proposals to CPPCC meetings, facilitates the MoE's conferences and drafts proposals for the MoE's policy-making in distance education. 'We also channel opinions from those experimental institutions to the MoE', C2 added. In this sense, it has an instrumental value for facilitating state-university communication and interaction.

It is worth noting that even until now, the 68 universities still have the status of 'experiment points'. The experiment hit a pause in the past decade, with the 68 universities enjoying an exclusive privilege. In 2014, the state published a document claiming that it would cancel MoE's approval right for distance education. It indicates that when a university wants to administer its distance education in the future, it no longer needs to acquire approval from the MoE. C1 interpreted this change as a signal from the state to open up distance education market to all universities. But in reality, it is much more complicated than simply issuing a policy document. The MoE hasn't

released any matching measures, so other universities were kept on hold for the past two years. C1 further gave an example:

> If a university decides to go ahead and operates its own distance education program—it is legitimate, but such legitimacy is useless. If the MoE doesn't have any matching policies, certificates issued by this university to distance education learners wouldn't be recognised by the society…this is because in China, the ultimate legitimacy and value of educational qualification are in the hands of the state, instead of individual institution.

7.4.3 Discussion: Creating strategy space in policy experiments

From being a voluntary initiative in 1996, the modern distance education experiment stumbled its way into the policy process after repeated negotiation and interaction. It officially became a state act in 1999. The above sections disentangle the consensus-building process by providing a thick description of how Tanhua University resisted the pressure from some of its direct administrative overseers and persuaded the MoE to formally recognise this initiative and include it in the policy process. This section analyses the salient factors which might have contributed to this result.

Significance of the experiment

The first factor was the significance of the experiment and its successful implementation. As C3 noted, 'There is no policy if your initiative is not successful in the first place, but being successful alone is not sufficient'. Among the original experiment points, there was a strong sense of mission and a large element of selfless devotion. A12 reflected on this, 'We believed it was a beneficial thing for the whole country in the long run' to share high quality educational resources with the wider public. This sentiment was echoed repeatedly by many of the early participants in this experiment: 'It was why we stuck to the project no matter what, and why it was eventually accepted by the country's leaders and our peers' (A12).

The fact that Tanhua was not aiming to pursue its own self-interest but to address social needs gave it additional leverage in persuading relevant administrative

authorities, attracting the necessary resources and funding, and winning the strategic support from high-level officials (A14). In addition, its successful implementation created a new, financial self-sustainable model of operation. Once it had negotiated a strategy space in which to work, the university could determine its tuition fees, and the tuition income in turn allowed the university to operate independently from government funding. 'This was a viable path for other universities to follow and perhaps also a reason that many universities proactively followed our lead,' A14 noted. 'It was a flexible model that could be adapted easily, expanded and replicated in a wide range of differing environments'.

Policy entrepreneurs and institutional resources

In this case, Tanhua's leaders and practitioners played the role of policy entrepreneurs. They had no models or precedents to follow, but to rely on their own creativity to develop strategies for discovering ways to advocate their ideas and winning support from the authorities. The success was heavily dependent on the institutional entrepreneurship with educationists' visions and practitioners' persistence, and Tanhua's leaders' 'political connection or negotiating skill' (Kingdon, 1984 p. 189-190)

Against various challenges and uncertainties, the Tanhua leadership had to create its own way and, in the process, showed others what could be done under constrained circumstances. A12 recalled his interactions with the MoE: 'every time I thought about this experiment, I believed strongly that it was for a good cause; the worst scenario was for them to dismiss me from my position.' The respondent continued, 'It was not a big deal – I would just go back to teaching'. As C3 noted,

> They [i.e., decision-makers and faculty of Tanhua] were willing to take risks, in terms of finance, reputation, administration and individual promotion, to stand against authority and to employ strategies which utilised alternative resources to acquire space to maneuver…they reflect some of the most valuable qualities of Chinese university leaders.

It was their motivation, pioneering spirit, innovative ideas and meticulous approach to implementing the project which made the project viable. In fact, due to the MoE's opposition and its pressure, Tanhua was particularly cautious during the planning and implementing phases, leaving nothing to chance. This no doubt contributed to the success of this experiment. The positive outcome demonstrated to the government that this project could be successfully implemented. It served as evidence to persuade the government to recognise and support this initiative.

With their bold attempt to propose an institutional initiative as a solution for a specific problem and get that initiative incorporated into the public agenda, the Tanhua's decision-makers and practitioners can be regarded as policy entrepreneurs. It was also their preferences and beliefs that determined their actions and interaction with the state—in this way individuals acted as agents to shape their institution's practices.

The project's successful implementation and eventual inclusion in the policy process might also be attributed to Tanhua's prestigious reputation in China. As an elite university, it had many paths that it could follow to solicit funding and appeal to the high-level state leaders for support, which were potentially unavailable to other universities. Due to its status and prestige, Tanhua had privileged access to the MoE. The MoE was more open to ideas from universities like Tanhua and more tolerant of their 'innovative or even unorthodox proposals' (C3). For these reasons, Tanhua was able to create a bottom-up channel for innovation in higher education.

National leaders' support

The national leaders' support also proved to be critical in this case, both in terms of institutional implementation and promotion to the state level. 'It was the direct reason why they (i.e., the people at the MoE) changed their minds and eventually included it in the *Action Plan*' (A13). In fact, as pointed out by several respondents, it is almost

impossible to carry out an innovative idea without administrative support in the Chinese context. Faced with the MoE's constant pressure, the Tanhua leadership deliberately decided to bypass the MoE and to appeal to its hierarchical leader for support. The results of that decision could not have been clearer at the time. 'Apparently, we made the right move, they became our strong supporters and promoted the legitimacy of what we were trying to do' (A12). Several respondents believed that this support from those high-level national leaders was a critical, if not the most important, reason for its successful implementation and later expansion to other universities.

In fact, the initial opposition from some Moe officials, the approval from the SRRC and the BRRC, and the decisive support from some national leaders all revealed the fact that the state was not a monolithic whole—each party had its own agenda and rationale based on their own respective interpretation of the reality and further shaped their interest articulation and actions. For example, when the Vice Premier expressed his support for the Tanhua's experiment, he effectively legitimised the initiative and left the MoE no room but to accept and support it. Instead of passively accepting the reality and waiting for other universities to imitate the Tanhua's act, the MoE responded by cobbling together an approach which would effectively put itself in charge by including this initiative in the national agenda and, further, diluted the Tanhua's singular privilege by involving other universities in the experiment process.

Institutional condition

Another factor that allowed the Tanhua reform to be recognised by the state and rolled out across a broader range at the time was the propitious institutional conditions that existed.

At the end of the 20th century, China confronted a severe problem in higher education. The growing demand for quality education was overwhelming China's

capacity. There were only limited resources to meet the demand. The problem was rapidly becoming evident and a source of social unrest. China at that time was rapidly developing its economy, but there was a severe shortage of skilled workers in the labor market. There was a clear need to expand the availability of education at all levels and to transform China's rudimentary education infrastructure into a modernised lifelong learning society and especially to make quality educational resources much more accessible to a much wider audience. All these made the potential market for distance education large enough to allow for its development on a self-sustainable operational basis. In fact, China's decision from 1998 to rapidly expand higher education enrollment responded directly to this imbalance between supply and demand (Marginson, Kaur & Sawir, 2011; Wang & Liu, 2011). As A16 observed, 'The promotion of modern distance education was one way to tackle the challenge. Distance education from the very beginning was used as a complement to formal education'.

In this sense, the development of modern distance education aligned with the country's economic needs at the time, its broader vision for broadening participation in higher education in the future, and the state's strategy for promoting educational informatisation. At that moment in history, the availability of a functioning cable network and the requisite digital technology facilitated China's achievement of its distance education goals.

Concomitantly, China, after a decade of preparation and effort, entered the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. As a result, China became subject to the WTO's regulation on education, i.e., the 'provision of an open market for education' (C2). At that time, though, the existing domestic education infrastructure could not provide the standard of education required by the WTO. It could not compete with its international counterparts. This situation provided the state with an added incentive to

build a new distance education system using up-to-date technology to increase its efficiency and competitiveness (Li, 2008).

Throughout the experiment and policy process, the interaction and negotiation process between Tanhua and the MoE demonstrated how different actors were expressing different interpretations and responses to reality as then constituted. Every reform involves conflicts of interests—this is almost inevitable. In a strongly hierarchical and heavily bureaucratic state like China, the conflict became especially evident when the forces of change came from the grassroots-level. Sometimes the conflicts inherent in the reform can be reconciled, but the process can also often become messy. In this case, for example, the existing regulations were rapidly becoming outdated and had even become an obstacle to the universities' sustainable development. Meanwhile, Tanhua came up with an initiative to solve this problem, but this initiative, at least in the beginning, was on a collision course with the existing protocols and regulations. When this conflict emerged, the PE provided a way through which the state and the university could 'pause' to negotiate until a new consensus could be reached. In this clash, the PE approach created a middle path within the existing legal framework, but at the same time it could be used as a break point for opening up new possibilities for making innovations in the existing regulations or traditions which were blocking progress toward much needed reforms. By strategically utilising its resources and interacting with the state, the university was able to create for itself a strategically important strategy space within which it had more options and more room to maneuver among the various vested interests who had a stake in the project. It is important to note that the boundary of the strategy space is ambiguous, and intentionally remain so, in order to accommodate the rapidly evolving shifts among the stakeholders in the decision-making process and to continue to maintain its effectiveness. The ambiguous

boundary of ‘strategy space’ and the constant bargaining and compromising between the state and the university reflect the essence of the Chinese practice as policy experimentation.

In the process, when the tension between more and better educational resources (especially from the SOEs managers and technicians, and businessmen) and limited availability of resources arose, Tanhua generated a novel experiment that allied with national patrons such as the Vice Premier. When it was promoted to become an official ‘experiment point’ along with other institutions in 1999, Tanhua, was endowed with more discretionary and regulatory power such as admission, administration and graduation, and acted as a ‘model demonstration’. With a certain adaptations and re-modifications, the experiment was gradually expanded to 68 universities as a ‘proceeding from point to surface’ phase. After that, this experiment, however, lost momentum and hit a pause. The process fit with the framework of Heilman (2008a) in capturing how the PE approach could be used to promote local initiatives into national policies with interplay between local initiatives and national patronage. However, his model assumed that the state was assuming a non-intervention stance during the experiment processes. This was not the case here. The above discussion reveals the intricacies of state-university interaction. The strategies employed by Tanhua demonstrated how an institution in China could creatively interact and negotiate with its administrative authorities to acquire more strategy space. Policy experimentation, in this sense, provides a route for local experiments to be included in the national agenda from a bottom-up approach.

7.5 Summary

The new era of distance education in China was unveiled in 1996 as the result of an individual institution's bold initiative, which has greatly changed the landscape of Chinese distance education at the tertiary level. It was an institutional entrepreneurial effort that started with a bottom-up path, but it later reverted to a top-down trajectory when the government officially brought more universities into the process.

This chapter discussed the detailed process of the initiation and implementation of this reform while exploring the possible rationales driving the interpretations and behaviors of the MoE and the university. The focus of this chapter was to reveal how, through experimentation, a university could interact and negotiate with its administrative authorities to acquire strategy spaces for its operation and build consensuses in the reform process. This chapter also discussed how the experiment entered the policy process and was expanded to other universities by taking Shannan University as an example. It assessed the extent to which state-university interactions changed when it was 'promoted' to a national act from an institutional one. Furthermore, it discussed salient factors that influenced the initiation, implementation and incorporation of this particular experimental attempt.

The chapter provided a comprehensive picture of the origin and process of this experimental reform. By providing an account as such, it demonstrated the potential value of using the PE as a platform for institutional interaction with the state to create strategy spaces, and as an institutionalised mechanism for facilitating the entry of local experiments to the reform process.

Chapter 8. Case IV: Establishing university bylaws

8.1 Introduction

Since the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, China has undergone tremendous changes. As an organic part of society, higher education has responded over the past three decades with various reforms. In this reform process, policy experimentation (PE) has acted as an enabling mechanism for introducing innovative changes to institutions of higher learning—these reforms have been either proactively initiated by universities or actively advocated by the state. The institutionalisation of reforms has yielded either productive outcomes with long-lasting affects or less satisfactory results that were eventually abandoned, as discussed in previous chapters.

In some instances, universities actively sought institutional autonomy through management reform, revealing the importance of the state's support (or at least its acquiescence) towards institutionally initiated reforms (Case I); in another case, universities utilised their expanded strategy space to creatively design and implement a new graduate employment system as an integral part of a state mandated reform (Case II); in yet other instances, universities were able to resist external pressure and muddle through by strategically utilising their resources and interacting with the state as shown in the distance education reform case (Case III). In all those investigated instances, PE proved to be a genuine way of producing innovative policy options (to different extent) with the possibility of being transferrable to a national scale and of facilitating state-university interaction to create a strategy space and build a consensus for reforms.

In the case presented in this chapter, however, PE demonstrated a different dimension of its functions. This chapter discusses a state-initiated 'policy experiment' in which a university had a limited 'strategy space' in which to maneuver as it formulated and implemented bylaws. In this case, the role of 'experiment' appeared to

be more methodological than substantial. The term ‘experiment’ here is used in its broadest sense.

As used in this thesis, ‘University Bylaws’ (*zhang cheng*) refers to a university’s written regulatory document that clearly defines the rights and obligations of the organisation and its stakeholders (such as Statues in some western universities). Bylaws do not constitute a charter, but they enshrine a set of regulations and rules governing a university’s general operation.

The *Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*, published in 1995, stipulates that newly established institutions of education must have an organisational structure and a *Zhang Cheng* (Article 26). This is the first official use of ‘bylaws’ in the Chinese context. Further, The *Higher Education Law of the People’s Republic of China* (1998) explicates the items required in a university’s bylaws (Article 28). The Ministry of Education (MoE) further encouraged existing higher education institutions (HEIs) to produce their own bylaws in order to operate under the framework of national laws and regulations as part of China’s development of a ‘rule of law’ system (Ministry of Education, 1999, Dec 02). A series of government documents and conferences further promoted this initiative.

In 2010, the Chinese government published a comprehensive education reform plan—*Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020* (hereinafter the *Outline*). This document pointed out how it was imperative for building a ‘modern university system’ in China and called for exploration and experimentation. Within this framework, the government explicitly called for experimental reforms for establishing university bylaws and improving university internal governance. The government, furthermore, enlisted 26 universities as experiment points to participate in this reform effort (State Council, 2011). The 26

selected universities were all HEIs directly administered by state ministries—i.e. they were all national universities (in contrast to regional universities). This chapter only discusses the efforts made by these experiment points concerning the making of bylaws, but those institutions were appointed also to conduct experiments regarding improving 'university internal governance' and building the 'modern university system' as a whole. Therefore, this chapter only covers one part of a more comprehensive process.

The basis for establishing bylaws lies in the *Higher Education Law*, but it only requires newly established HEIs to have bylaws. The government further encouraged existing universities to develop bylaws. Jilin University[18], a leading Chinese research university, was the first HEI to publish and implement modern university bylaws in 2005[19]. In general, however, Chinese universities were not overly excited about this initiative. Only around 30% of HEIs published their bylaws by 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011, Nov 25).

In 2011, the MoE further published an *Interim Measures for the Formulation of Bylaws of Higher Education Institutions (*hereinafter the *Interim Measures).* It detailed specific instructions for experiment points to follow in establishing bylaws (Ministry of Education, 2011, Nov 28). In 2013, six experiment points submitted their bylaw proposals to the MoE.

Concomitantly, the practice of bylaws making extended beyond the twenty-six experiment points. In fact, in 2013, the MoE published a step-by-step timeline for universities under the administration of state ministries to follow (Ministry of Education,

[18] Jilin University's initiative was closely related to its history. At the end of the 20th century, the State Council started a round of higher education structural adjustments. As a result, Jilin University merged with five other universities to form the New Jilin University. It was then in need of a regulative document for its operation and development. It was under these circumstances Jilin started to draft its bylaws.
[19] There were regulations of a similar nature in some Chinese education establishments before modern China. For example, Tsinghua College (*qing hua xue tang*), the predecessor of Tsinghua University, had bylaws to regulate its operation under the sovereignty of the Tsing dynasty.

Sep 26)[20]. By the end of June 2015, all Project 985 and Project 211 universities had published their bylaws. According to B3, a senior MoE official, this effort was 'more or less finished' among general higher education institutions by 2016.

Those designated experiment points were expected to formulate bylaws as a supposed means for institution building; on the other hand, they were imposed with detailed instructions and constant intervention from the administrative authorities. It is therefore intriguing to understand the nature and role of this initiative – was it a 'true experiment' in the first place or the state's veiled effort to use a few selected universities to gradually expand the implementation of a pre-designed change? This chapter discusses why this initiative was put forward and how selected universities interpreted and responded to it. Tiankui University (pseudonym) is used as an illustrative example to capture the complexities involved in this reform (8.2.1), while Shuisu (pseudonym) is presented as a comparative account (8.2.2). This chapter explores the conduct of this 'experiment' and how it reflects the characteristic features of state-university relations in China in the new era (post-2000) (8.3).

The interviewees who are relevant to this case, their positions and designated code in this chapter can be referred to in Appendix IV. The documents relevant to this case include both primary documents, such as university yearbooks and government papers, and secondary literature, such as bibliographies of key players, media reports and scholarly work (see references).

[20] In the *Action Plan for the Formulation of Bylaws of Higher Education Institutions under the State Ministries 2013-2015*, the MoE required that Project 985 universities complete their university bylaws by June 2014, Project 211 universities by the end of 2014, and all other universities under the direct administration of the Ministry of Education and other ministries by the end of 2015.

8.2 Bylaws formulation to build a Modern University System

8.2.1 Stakeholders' interpretations: Tiankui University as an experiment point

Historically, Tiankui has always been one of China's elite universities. Located in one of east China's major metropolises, Tiankui is still a leading research university with a record of conducting pioneering education reforms. This section describes how Tiankui – one of the earliest experiment points – formulated its bylaws and explored the university's and the state's (changing) interpretations of a evolving situation. Using concrete examples as illustrations, this section investigates how the university interacted with the MoE to negotiate a certain discretionary space even when confronted by the state's relatively explicit instructions and constraints.

From the start, Tiankui was not particularly proactive in formulating its bylaws. A well-established elite university, it was 'quite conservative about jumping into this initiative at the beginning' and wanted to 'wait until other universities had conducted their experiments first,' explained A18, who directly participated in the process of drafting Tiankui's bylaws and had worked there for decades.

There are several underlying reasons which explain Tiankui's initial reluctance to embrace this state sponsored initiative. First, the 'bylaws' in this context are not laws or the central government's regulations. These bylaws, rather, constitute documents which articulate administrative norms, approved and published by the Ministry of Education. These bylaws have the authority of a ministerial level policy paper rather than the binding legal power to regulate everyone involved in HE affairs. In addition, in this Chinese context, many things rely on the 'red-dotted documents' (*hong tou wen jian*) to operate. *Hong tou wen jian* is a colloquial expression referring to those formal, official policy documents (such as *Decisions, Suggestions, etc.*) issued by high-level authorities. Those 'red-dotted documents' *do not* include laws, administrative

regulations, provincial regulations, etc. They normally *would not* be made available, like laws and regulations, to the general public. These documents are passed down internally through the hierarchical system within the state bureaucracies. In reality, they may even be above the law. This reliance on such 'red-dotted documents' reflects the reality of a rule-by-document that supersedes the rule-of-law. Therefore, the state's publication of a 'red-dotted document' can easily be used to override the regulations stipulated in a university's bylaws, which only have the authority of a ministerial-level policy paper. In this situation, a university might naturally doubt the power of its bylaws as a regulatory document for navigating its operations and protecting its rights.

Another reason that a university might not see its bylaws as a particularly empowering mechanism is that existing regulations did not leave a university with much wiggle room to negotiate and operate, so that their potential contribution from the start was seriously limited. The external relationship between the government and the universities was already clearly defined by a number of laws, such as the *Education Law* and the *Higher Education Law*. Some government regulations further defined certain specifications in this respect. Under the current Chinese system, the government is the 'sponsor' of institutions of higher learning – in this context, 'sponsor' referring to the entity that 'owns' the public universities and supports them by supplying their necessary funding and resources. The Presidents and Party Secretaries of universities are appointed by the government to manage public universities according to law. If the bylaws document administrative norms, by their very nature, they embody the sponsor's will. Therefore, though Tiankui was granted an opportunity through this experiment to draft its bylaws (in order to tailor it to its unique institutional needs and characteristics), its drafted bylaws would need to conform to the state's rules and regulations and approved and published by the MoE, as representative of the state's approved

bureaucracy in the education sector. This catch-22 might explain why certain people involved in the bylaws formulation process had the feeling that 'it should be the state that formulates the bylaws and we cooperate since we couldn't really change anything in terms of our external relationships' (A18).

Regarding internal relationships, Tiankui already had a highly structured internal governance system. For Tiankui, the existence of a 'by-laws' document was not considered important or necessary as long as the university 'had an established, mutually agreed upon logic in its internal governance', noted by A17, who directed this experiment in Tiankui University . The fact that many universities did not have bylaws did not necessarily mean that they didn't have a set of regulations detailing rights and obligations. This point was echoed by A18, a key informant in the process: 'we did not see having bylaws as a big thing: without them, we had been operating pretty well; having them wouldn't make us worse.' The respondent believed that with all those existing regulations and administrative orders, having another document called 'bylaws' was simply a matter of formality.

These constraints were particularly true since the MoE was constantly issuing new regulations and instructions regarding the making of bylaws during the experiment process. One of the most frequently cited examples is the *Interim Measures* published in 2011 that provided detailed instructions regarding the content of university bylaws.

These interpretations at the initial stage may explain Tiankui's reluctance to go down this road of experimenting with bylaws formulation. Gradually, though, as the experiment proceeded (especially under the MoE's advocacy through policy documents outlining the timeline for completing the experiment or through less-systematic approaches such as conferences and officials' public speeches), the people involved in Tiankui's bylaws formulation process started to place more value in this process.

In hindsight, it might now be regarded as a significant reform gesture, since it gave the university an opportunity to summarise its existing ways of operation and governance into a generally applicable text as bylaws – the 'constitution of the university'. This significance needs to be looked at against the underlying broader movement towards the building of a 'modern university system' and rule-of-law system in China. Allowing HEIs to formulate bylaws by themselves was 'a driving force to push the building of a modern university system' and 'a prelude to another round of devolution and a way to self-regulate university behaviors', A20, who directly participated in Tiankui's bylaws formulation project, commented. As A17 further explained it, who believed the state's intention was to give the university – the entity which actually ran and managed the institution – a chance to 'exercise its autonomy and to define its external relationship with the government and broader society.' In this sense, this experimental practice evolved into a form of empowerment which allow the university to use its bylaws as a reference and roadmap for future operations.

This perception aligned well with the expectations of certain MoE officials. For example, B3 believed that an important challenge facing Chinese universities at the time was to enhance their governance and raise their rule-of-law capability. It is arguably true that many past problems in China, such as the Cultural Revolution, derived from the fact that there was a lack of mutually agreed upon frameworks and clear codes of conduct. The respondent expressed his opinion on this matter, believing that it was the government's hope that 'through the process of bylaws formulation, university leaders and practitioners could reach agreements, so we can later all operate under a shared set of rules.' Moreover, it was hoped that this process might help to 'turn the MoE into more of a service-oriented organisation from a heavily top-down administrative role' (which had been criticised by both the Chinese and foreign scholarship and media).

Therefore, perhaps one of the biggest drivers behind this initiative from the state's perspective was to use the formulation and establishment of bylaws as an opportunity to transform university governance into one governed by law. These messages had also been reiterated many times by certain high-level state leaders and politicians, who hoped the establishment of bylaws could be particularly useful in advancing 'modern university system' development.

In this vein, the MoE claimed that it viewed its role primarily as motivating the universities to use this 'experiment' to acquire more autonomy and to articulate their ideas in a systematic way. As B3, a senior MoE official, stressed: 'We hoped that they [the universities] could include what they wanted in the bylaws rather than what was wanted by their administrative authorities by simply following their instructions step-by-step.' Some MoE officials and political leaders hoped that the experiment points could use the formulation process as an opportunity to develop and reinforce an 'autonomous mindset' and to wean themselves away from over-dependence on the state authorities. In this sense, the concrete content of the bylaws was less important. The government wanted to emphasise that it was offering Tiankui a degree of discretion in formulating their own bylaws. The MoE also claimed that it was only making minor changes to the submitted bylaws drafts. As stated by B3 on behalf of the MoE:

> It was not our job to teach a university how it should behave and improve. Similarly, if they didn't take this opportunity to innovate, it was not our job to help them either. We gave them a great degree of freedom to experiment, so the process actually had more bottom-up than top-down features.

However, that the university sector might interpret the situation differently.

8.2.2 Implementation and interaction

To what degree did the MoE's claim reflect the true picture of the experiment? And to what degree did the university's interpretations of the situation affect its implementation of this project and its interactions with the state?

Due to its initial perception of this initiative, Tiankui didn't start to formulate its bylaws immediately after it was appointed as an experiment point. In September 2013, however, the MoE issued a specific timeline regarding its completion (*Action Plan for the Formulation of Bylaws of Higher Education Institutions under the State Ministries 2013-2015*). Using its administrative power to urge HEIs to put this issue onto their agenda, the MoE left Tiankui no choice but to undertake this initiative. In December 2013, Tiankui held a meeting to announce formally its initiation of this bylaws formulation process. Only after half a year did it submit a final text to the MoE. The MoE approved and published Tiankui's bylaws in September 2014. Table 12 outlines Tiankui's bylaws formulation process and documents the key benchmarks in the process.

Table 12 ***Timeline of Tiankui University's bylaws formulation***

Date	Event	Content
July 2010	Publication of *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020*	It called for exploration and experimentation within higher education to build a modern university system
Jan 2011	Publication of State Council's *Announcement on the Reform of National Education System*	Tiankui was appointed as one of the 26 experiment points to 'formulate bylaws and improve university internal governance' as part of a broader 'modern university system' building project
Nov 2011	Publication of *Interim Measures for the Formulation of Bylaws of Higher Education Institutions*	It provided specific instructions regarding the content and procedures for bylaws formulation
June 2012	Publication of *Outline of the 12th Five-Year Plan for the National Education Development of the People's Republic of China*	It set the goal that HEIs should achieve the aim of 'one university, one set of bylaws' by 2015
Sep 2013	Publication of *Action Plan for the Formulation of Bylaws of Higher Education Institutions under the State Ministries 2013-2015*	It required Project 985 universities to complete their university bylaws formulation by June 2014, Project 211 universities by the end of 2014, and all other universities directly by the Ministry of Education and other ministries by the end of 2015
Dec 2013	Tiankui hosted a meeting to announce its initiation in bylaws formulation	Tiankui formed two teams: a leading team composed of administrative leaders such as the university president; and a drafting team mainly composed of policy experts and researchers
Sep 2014	The MoE approved and published Tiankui's bylaws	It signalled the end of Tiankui's experiment on this initiative

This section discusses Tiankui's strategies regarding the circumstances of its participation in this process and how it was able to make certain innovative changes as reflected in their final published bylaws.

Tiankui relied primarily on formal correspondence as its most important communicative mechanism in its bylaws formulation process. In early 2014, Tiankui submitted its draft bylaws to the relevant bureau of the MoE. In turn, the bureau provided written feedback to the university. The university then revised the content accordingly, either following or challenging the MoE's suggestions, and then submitted a revised draft. This cycle continued until a working consensus was reached, both in terms of the document's substantive content and its articulation. Tiankui's representatives maintained a constant channel of communications with the relevant MoE bureaus throughout this process (according to the university's records, they formally communicated with the MoE seven times during the process). On behalf of the MoE, B3 later reflected, 'We placed a high priority on this issue. Every time when someone from the university – regardless of the institution – visited regarding the bylaws, I would drop my other work and give priority to meeting them first.'

Scheduled conferences constituted another formal channel of communication. Some conferences were more communicative to allow the MoE to collect the university's thoughts and ideas, while other conferences were more administratively heavy with the MoE releasing guidelines and sharing best practices. In this case, the MoE applied this soft power approach a couple of times over the course of the formulation process, as summarised in Table 13.

Table 13 ***A list of conferences relevant to bylaws formulation***

Date	Name	Content	Place	Type
20/12 /2010	Initiating meeting for experimentation of building 'modern university system' (Ministry of Education, 2010, Dec 20)	Representatives from 28 experiment points (relevant to the whole experiment of modern university system building) and state ministries exchanged ideas; The MoE made plans for the experiment	Beijing	A
25/11 /2011	Seminar on building 'modern university system' (Ministry of Education, 2011, Nov 25)	Representatives from 13 experiment points located in South China and the MoE exchanged ideas; The MoE urged experiment points to start formulating bylaws as a model to demonstrate to other HEIs since the progress was not satisfactory	Central China Normal University, Wuhan	A
11/01 /2012	Seminar on bylaws formulation (Ministry of Education, 2012, Jan 11)	Representatives from 15 experiment points communicated with the MoE and other research centres. The MoE made plans for bylaws initiative	Peking University, Beijing	B
03-04/20 12	Workshop for bylaws formulation in higher education institutions (The advancing process of university bylaws in Northwestern University, 2014)	The MoE respectively hosted four workshops to help universities to formulate bylaws	Nationwide	B
15/06 /2012	Interim meeting for experimentation of building 'modern university system' (2012)	Representatives of experiment points and the MoE exchanged ideas	Sichuan University, Chengdu	A
11/07 /2013	First conference of the Approval Committee of university bylaws (2013, Aug 19)	Bylaws of six experiment points that complete first were approved by the MoE; they exchanged ideas and experiences; The MoE advocated other universities to actively participate in this initiative	Donghua University , Shanghai	B
03/04 /2014	Conference to exchange experience on bylaws formulation for Project 985 universities (2014, April 4)	Representatives of 36 Project 985 universities and the MoE exchanged ideas and discussed further development in formulating bylaws	Renmin University, Beijing	B
22/05 /2014	Conference to promote 'modern university system' building and bylaws formulation for Project 211 universities (2014, May 23)	It summarised experiences and lessons in formulating bylaws and encouraged Project 211 universities to actively participate in the process	Nanchang University, Nanchang	B
31/10 /2014	Conference to promote bylaws formulation for regional universities (2014, Nov 3)	It summarised experiences and lessons in formulating bylaws and encouraged regional universities (i.e., provincial/municipal universities) to actively participate in the process	Wuhan	B

Note. A= For the whole experiment; B=Specifically for bylaws formulation experiment

In a sense, using conferences as a means of governance resembles the practice of the European Union's open method of coordination (Open method of coordination, n.d.). For example, B3 stated that the MoE would not force any institution to establish bylaws. Instead, the MoE used moral suasion and sometimes even 'naming and shaming' to coerce the universities to comply. The MoE would resort to statements such as, 'Your university is one of the few that hasn't established bylaws' at a national conference to goad reluctant institutions to act. This would inevitably lead to peer pressure for the university to perform better.

There were also less formal ways for the university to communicate with the MoE. For example, during conference breaks, 'people came to consult us about their ideas' (B3). In Tiankui's case, when the university was unsure about how to articulate certain issues, A17 commented on how 'I would call or meet MoE people to communicate our ideas. They would also give us suggestions. In general, the whole process was quite pleasant'. This feeling was shared among other Tiankui respondents who came away from the process believing that the MoE generally respected their will. As explained by A18:

> It might have been because they knew that they were not as familiar about HE affairs as we were, so they had to rely on the learned man. They also respected our status, hoping that we could pioneer innovations through our bylaws which would push Chinese HE reforms.

Also, the much-complained *Interim Measures* was reported as a result of the MoE's consultation with academics in certain elite universities. They were also told, informally, that they could make adjustments, since this project was still in the experimentation stage, and the MoE did not have any experience in making such a document. So the university could be more discretionary rather than 'necessarily follow everything in the *Interim Measures*' (A18). This is a typical example of how the university at times was granted the latitude to creatively 'interpret' the government's policies to better suit their

specific needs and interests during the experiment. From the university's perspective, the status of 'experiment point' permitted and encouraged it to explore innovations and even break existing restrictions. A17 further explained,

> The MoE produced those instructions based on past experiences and aimed for their universal applicability. But for a university like us, what we did in reality did not necessarily mirror what was required by the written text. Experimenting with new approaches inevitably means that, to a certain degree, we needed to find creative ways to break with the existing rules and regulations. In China, sometimes, 'no comment' can be a comment—it is an implicit way to take a stand. So if no one stood up and said no, then we could take that as acquiescence.

This being said, it became increasingly evident to the university practitioners during the drafting process that the existence of various government regulations made the experiment 'more like a symbolic act since the MoE already had established the format and content of each part of the bylaws', as stated by A19, who had direct experience with this project in Tiankui. A comparison of various universities' published bylaws shows that many of them were homogeneous. As put by A20, 'If you left out names, you wouldn't even notice any differences among many of the universities' bylaws.' True, certain universities simply followed the state's constraints and restrictions and accepted as given the limited space to maneuver. As a result, as A17 pointedly observed, 'Their bylaws basically were no use at all'.

For Tiankui, the people involved in the drafting process were very aware of the fact that it was easy to follow the given instructions and do 'the compulsories', but Tiankui's representatives wanted to prioritise 'the electives' to project and to stress its uniqueness.

'Elective A': reform-oriented vision

Tiankui intentionally included reforms it aimed to undertake in the future in its bylaws, hoping that this formulation process approach would be a way to back up its reform initiatives.

For example, in its bylaws, Tiankui identified three types of positions (teaching-only posts, research-only posts, and teaching-research posts) and specified their boundaries. Later it cited these bylaws as a point of reference to push its personnel reform. Similarly, Tiankui's bylaws stipulated that the university shall set up an Admissions Committee, a Teaching Committee and a Strategic Planning Committee respectively. It hoped to restore the Teaching Committee in every department to be in charge of teaching affairs to achieve a division of power with the University Council and Academic Committee. By instituting this reform, Tiankui also hoped to re-emphasise the importance of teaching in response to the prevailing disproportionate focus on research under the purview of the Academic Committee. It is now on Tiankui's internal governance reform agenda. This specific measure was later imitated in the bylaws of other universities (A19).

In line with its overall reform-oriented thinking, Tiankui intentionally left out all second-degree requirements stipulated in the state's instructions and regulations to leave room for further reform. A17 explained in describing the rationale behind this decision:

> We believed it was the time for great changes. If we put everything down on paper, we would have had no room to navigate. Breaking with even one regulation would have invalidated the whole thing – so we wanted to build in a certain flexibility for our reforms.

Based on this perception achieved through extensive internal discussions, Tiankui produced a set of bylaws which, comparing with all the published texts, was the shortest among all the participating universities. For example, its bylaws contained 5720 words, while Shuisu University (another sub-case in this case) had 12811 words in its published bylaws. The Tiankui document was deliberately designed to be ambiguous and at a macro level of abstraction so it left maximum space for individual application and interpretation (A18).

'Elective B': consolidating rights and establishing new rights

In addition, Tiankui used the 'experiment' to acquire more power from the state, or at least to consolidate certain existing powers in a systematic way. For example, in a specific chapter of the bylaws, every item begins with the phrase 'autonomously decide' to give the university mamximum space to exercise its discretion.

More specifically, in the bylaws, Tiankui has full discretion in deciding 'levels, structures and approaches to admission (for example, bachelor-master's-doctoral degrees) and disciplinary structures according to the state-mandated scale of admission. In this way, Tiankui consolidated its rights in admission (though still within the prescribed limits). When certain universities questioned Tiankui's graduate admissions, the MoE used Tiankui's bylaws as a reference point to those in doubt. The bylaws were also used to protect the university's certain rights against the will of other ministries, as noted by A17.

Those rights as reflected in the published bylaws, however, were only able to be included after several rounds of tough negotiation and many mutuall agreed compromises between Tiankui. In the beginning, the MoE felt that Tiankui was abrogating too much power through all those phrases starting with 'autonomously decide' rights and denied and deleted some in its revisions. Some of those deleted rights that Tiankui deemed important were later added back and approved subject normally to the MoE's revisions.

For example, Tiankui wished to independently award degrees and design graduation certificates (under its own name and university logo). As an elite university, it believed that this measure might be 'a good signal to potential employers about our graduates' (A18) – it wanted to allow the market to evaluate the value of a degree based on the degree granting institution rather than on the national higher education system.

The MoE opposed this proposition at the beginning, but after many rounds of negotiation, the MoE approved Tiankui's proposal to 'autonomously decide' the 'design and specification of certificates' (among other rights such as 'autonomously deciding' how to define and name each of the disciplines in its curriculum). But the MoE added the phrase 'according to law' regarding the power of 'awarding degrees'. In the published bylaws, the MoE stipulates that Tiankui shall 'award degrees according to the law and autonomously decide on the printing specifications of the degree certificates.'

As A18 later reflected, 'It might have been that the government was afraid of increasing inequalities by allowing only elite universities to do this, especially given China's already differentiated HE system.' For example, the non-elite universities, as A20 explained, might have preferred to use the government awarded degrees and unified certificates with the national emblem as a logo. But Tiankui still decided to propose and negotiate. A20 also acknowledged that after they expressed their firm intention and cogently communicated it to the MoE through its bylaws proposal, they became aware that the state also hoped to push the reform process in this direction - 'That's probably why they let us go ahead, but they also told us that granting the university the power to award degrees was too big a step so for this reason they refused our proposal.' This explains why it did not appear in the published bylaws, though it had been proposed in the initial draft.

In fact, later in July 2015, the state published *Regulations on Managing Degree Certificates and Information*, stipulating that from 2016 onwards, all degree certificates shall be designed and printed by their issuing bodies (i.e., higher education institutions); the national emblem would no longer be allowed on certificates (Ministry of Education, 2015, July 8). In a way, this was the MoE's way of recognising the change proposed by Tiankui in its bylaws drafting. Though it seems a trivial issue, A20 regarded it as an

important positive sign that might one day lead to greater changes concerning the devolution of degree-awarding power from the state to the university.

Some items were less successful. They had to be re-proposed by the university but often refuted again by the MoE. For example, in Tiankui's initial draft submitted to the MoE, it proposed to 'autonomously decide the scale, level, structure and approaches of admission.' The MoE cut down the 'scale' because it believed that this dimension should be decided by the HEI's 'sponsor' (i.e., the government) rather than the 'manager' (i.e. the university practitioners). The state has always been firm in its stand regarding the scale of admissions, primarily due to the fact that admission has always been subject to the level of government funding to the public universities.

For some rights, the university amended its ideas and their articulation to achieve a consensus with the MoE. For example, Tiankui, in imitation of the Western university model, hoped to set up a board of trustees as the university's governing and decision-making body. In this way, it aimed to establish a link with the broader society so the university could be better informed of social and economic needs in its decision-making. Chinese universities, however, operate under a dual governance system – a presidential responsibility system under the Party Committee's leadership. The university's Party Committee is the decision-making body and is not compatible with a board of trustees. Still hoping to achieve this end, Tiankui compromised its pursuit and strategically altered its articulation. So instead of formally establishing a board of trustees, it set up a Strategic Planning Committee as an advisory body as the main channel for society to participate in university affairs. The MoE approved this negotiated alternative. Based on its approved Bylaws, Tiankui later implemented its Strategic Planning Committee in 2016.

In general, there were clearly disagreements on certain issues between Tiankui

and the MoE. But the two parties tacitly carved out a flexible space for negotiation and bargaining to build a consensus. More often than not, this had to do with the individuals involved in the negotiating process and their approaches, their articulation of ideas and their implementation of proposals. As A17 succiently pointed out, 'The university's interaction with the MoE was based on mutual trust and the pursuit of the same ultimate objective. Communication was key in addressing the discrepancies in our understandings and approaches'. As A20 illustrated the process further,

> In the formulation process, the negotiation between us and the MoE was like a game: the university needed to clearly identify and articulate its needs - it had to demonstrate why it wanted a particular right and the legitimacy for such request; in response, the MoE decided to which degree it could grant those requests. It was by no means an antagonistic relationship. It was also a process in which we could both map each other's needs and boundaries. The outcome might not have been the original or ideal idea of either party, but usually, through our extensive discussions and negotiations, we were able to reach a shared consensus as a foundation on which to build further actions.

After all, 'It was through these constant negotiations that we reached a consensus as to how Tiankui's bylaws would look as you see them today' (A18). In the Tiankui case, the bylaws formulation process started in December 2013 and the final bylaws were published in September 2014. There were a few months allotted to consensus-building. It is also noteworthy that even though sometimes the words were put down in the bylaws, that didn't necessarily mean that Tiankui always managed to put them into practice – 'many things needed to be negotiated and left to interpretation' (A17). After all, the ultimate authority in decision-making, in both the negotiation process in the experiment and follow-up utilisation of published bylaws, is held by the state.

8.2.3 A comparative case: Another experiment point from the West of China

Shuisu (pseudonym) is a comprehensive elite university located in western China. Designated a Project 985 university and key national university, one of its missions is to fuel the economic and social development of the less affluent and

comparatively underdeveloped area of western China. Shuisu was among the 26 universities appointed as ‘experiment points’ for improving ‘internal university governance’ and formulating university bylaws. In this case, Shuisu has been chosen as an example for study to show how a second-tier elite university with less prestige, fewer resources, and a remote location far from the power center maneuvered and positioned itself in this atypical policy experiment.

Initiation

Though this bylaws experiment appeared to be a state-appointed, top-down experiment, Shuisu proactively sought the opportunity to become an ‘experiment point’ for this project. Behind its actions, Shuisu had various rationales.

Shuisu’s leaders regarded participation in a state-initiated reform as a good opportunity to solidify its position at the national forefront of higher education reforms and to push reforms in their own institution well beyond this one particular aspect. According to A22, who participated throughout in Shuisu’s formulation of bylaws, the university also hoped to acquire more government policy and financial support by actively engaging in the state-mandated reform process. In a way, this enthusiasm to participate might be considered a reflection of Shuisu’s lower level of prestige compared to Tiankui. A23, another major participant in the drafting process, took this line of reasoning even further: ‘It benefited the institution’s progressive self-development, especially when our own internal interest in changing converged with the government’s intentions.’ According to this respondent, the designation of ‘experiment point’ was perceived as a way to demonstrate the university’s achievement and status within the national higher education system.

Implementation

At Shuisu, the formulation of bylaws officially began in October 2012, a few months after the publication of the *Outline of the 12th Five-Year Plan for National Education Development of the People's Republic of China,* which clearly required every HEI to achieve the aim of 'one university, one set of bylaws' by 2015. The drafting team, however, claimed that they started to work on this issue as part of the 'modern university building' experiment earlier than 2012, conducting study visits and expert consultation as part of their preparatory work.

Initially, Shuisu established two parallel teams to work on drafting a set of bylaws. The first team was primarily formed by the administrative Party Secretary's Office. This team's drafting drew upon Shuisu's experience and used the established bylaws of China's other universities as models. According to A23, this team 'was more administration heavy and focused mainly on the current situation and urgency to get a document completed.' The university's Development Research Centre directed the second team. It was primarily comprised of researchers and academics. In its initial draft, this team considered the university's vision and drew many lessons from the international experience of research universities. Hence, in comparison, this second team was less administrative and bureaucratic in its outlook and more forward-looking in its vision and ideas.

When the two drafts were brought together, as A22 pointedly observed, 'the first one was given more weight so we primarily went with that one.' At that moment, the Shuisu team adopted a conservative stance and decided to stick more firmly to the government's stipulated regulations to avoid conflicts with the Party Secretary Office's administrative authority. This mindset was repeatedly reflected in interviews. A cross-reference comparison of Shuisu's bylaws and the state's regulations (especially *the*

Interim Measures) showed that there were few unique points in its published bylaws, but 'they were mainly non-essential matters', as A22 noted: 'Many of the universities' bylaws looked similar, because the MoE had clearly regulated what we thought we might say.'

One respondent emphasised, however, that the resemblance of Sanbach's bylaws to certain of the state's stipulated regulations did not necessarily imply that the university was simply adhering closely to the government's given instructions. According to A23, 'There were some things we already considered including in our bylaws even before they were encouraged in the state's relevant regulations.' A23 gave a further example. Shuisu had hoped to set up an Academic Committee which was less involved with the university's administrative leaders. The MoE had strongly advocated this move in 2014 by publishing a separate policy document calling for such an establishment in all HEIs. 'Even if that had not been the case, we would have still included it in our bylaws anyway, though our articulation of it might have been slightly different from the state's guidelines' (A23).

Even if this claim were true, it could still be interpreted as a response to the state's expectations, particularly as reflected in various ongoing political messages regarding de-bureaucratisation.[21]

Interaction

In November 2013, Shuisu submitted the initial draft of its bylaws to the MoE. According to interviews, after two rounds of correspondence exchange, the approved version was published by the MoE in May 2014. In the process, 'we accepted some

[21] As dicussed in Chapter 4, the ranking of Chinese public universities is associated with different levels of political administration. For example, universities under the administration of the Ministry of Education equal departments/units at the deputy ministry level of the central government. Therefore, their presidents and party secretaries are associated with the relevant political ranks and appointed and supervised by respective administrative authorities. The de-bureacratisation initiative aimed to untie this link and free higher education institutions from administrative constraints.

changes and argued to maintain others by reasoning with our rationales. The MoE agreed without further requirement to these changes, so ultimately these were kept' (A22).

A21, who led Shuisu's experiment, believed that the outcome of Shuisu's bylaws formulation process was a product negotiated through the university's dynamic interaction with the state's authorities. In this way, a balance was achieved by abiding with the government's regulations but at the same time defending the university's unique strengths and characteristics. There was formal interaction in this process—the exchanges of drafts, rounds of revision, and participation in periodic conferences. However, by comparing the initial draft, revised draft and published bylaws, the revisions seemed to be kept to a general minimum.

The perception of a seemingly harmonious working relationship between Shuisu and the MoE might relate to Shuisu's initial stance. From the project's inception, Shuisu took the *Interim Measures* and other regulations as its main reference point and did not intend to make many innovative moves. Those regulations had already clearly stipulated the content of a bylaws, according to A22, who thought that there was simply little room for them to maneuver. The respondent further explained,

> Subjectively we wanted to make certain changes and acquire more rights through the bylaws. However, the administrative structure determined that it was not possible. To be honest, it was a top-down process – as a public university we had to do what the government asked, and we simply could not break the limits it set. We went to a couple of conferences and some MoE officials did encourage us to personalise our bylaws and articulate our needs. But it was hard to put that into practice given the existing regulations. We could have personalised our bylaws by mentioning our university anthem and emblem, but that had no substantial meaning. Let's take a step back – if the MoE hadn't published those instructions, I doubt that there would be much difference in terms of making breakthroughs in essential matters – for example, the state-university power relationship.

A23 acknowledged that, in China's HE experimental practice, there has been, in general, a certain degree of flexibility and the university was able to acquire some strategy space

to maneuver, but such space in this case was rather limited: 'There were possibilities for each university to add distinctive things to its bylaws, but not every institution was aware of how to utilise this space.' The respondent continued, 'in the end, it came down to the individual university and its wisdom.' Similar to the comparion of the two universities in Case III, certain respondents in Shuisu also believed that 'if an innovative idea was forbidden by laws or regulations, you simply could not do it. Even if there were no regulations encouraging or requiring you to do so, you still could not do it' (A21).

Shuisu's mindset marks a contrast with Tiankui's thoughts and deeds. As C4, an education practitioner and scholar, aptly put it, 'For Chinese universities in the western region, they believed if the government hadn't asked you to do certain things, you could not do them.' The respondent continued, 'But for their counterparts in the eastern region, they believed that, if there was no opposition or rules explicitly against certain initiatives, then you could proceed with your own ideas.'

The reactive versus proactive mentality might well explain why the interaction processes (e.g., Tiankui engaged in more communication and negotiation) and subsequent outputs (i.e., in published bylaws, Tiankui arguably had more forward-looking items) between the two experiment points differed. Their different statuses, resources and proactivity shaped their interpretations and thus influenced their positions in this case. This difference might have to do with their relative levels of eliteness, but the more obvious reason to explain the resulting differences in terms of negotiated strategy space and reform outcomes largely had more to do with the 'university leaders–their visions, open-mindedness and initiatives' (A22). It is especially true given that, in China's universities, the power and authority for internal governance is largely condensed at the institutional level rather than the departmental level. The university

leaders' interpretations of the nature of bylaws and purpose of this experiment therefore directly influenced their respective institutional behaviors in the process. Some universities regarded it as an opportunity to consolidate and acquire certain rights from the MoE and regulate its behaviors under the framework of the rule-of-law; other universities might not have been fully aware of the potential empowerment which the bylaws may have endowed them with; and still other universities were simply inclined to follow the government's instructions to avoid potential conflicts and risks.

Another reason which might explain these differences was the location and resources of the two institutions. Tiankui was located in the most developed eastern area while Shuisu was located in the remote, less developed western area. In general, the universities and governments located in the eastern regions were more proactive and progressive compared to their counterparts in the western regions. Those in the east, like Tiankui, had relatively earlier exposure to international influences due to the convenience of their location and access to transportation. Hence, it might be that it was also easier for Tiankui to build communication channels with the MoE because that Tiankui was close to the power centre.

There were also differences in the degree of resource dependency on the central government. Provinces in the eastern region were generally more financially able to support universities in their jurisdiction, place a higher value on higher education, and be relatively open towards reforms. As C4 noted, 'Support from the western provinces cannot be compared to eastern ones.' As in Shuisu's case, 'Our local government was not particularly good in this respect, even when compared to neighboring provinces also located in the west' (A23). This might explain why Shuisu was more reactive in its responses to the government's mandates since it relied directly and more heavily on government resources.

8.3 An exploratory and explanatory account

8.3.1 Limited value of experimentation

A delineation of the initiation, implementation and interaction of Tiankui's formulation of its bylaws reveals how different stakeholders interpreted and reacted to the situation. It became increasingly clear, as the 'experiment' unfolded, that this case did not fit the definition of a traditional policy experiment as previously understood.

In essence, this bylaws experiment did not originate from the imperative of exploring potential reform agendas in response to the existing challenges and problems (such as in Case I) or probing strategies to achieve certain desired outcomes (such as in Case II), nor from a certain vision of higher education development (such as in Case III). There was already a well-established consensus for the legitimacy of establishing bylaws within HEIs - the *Higher Education Law* required every newly established HEI to have bylaws, and the state pushed existing universities to develop bylaws as well. Establishing bylaws in Chinese universities fit well with the national agenda of building a modern university system and rule-of-law governance, though 'it did not involve any policy breakthroughs' (B6). 'Everyone knew that we were required to formulate bylaws in the end,' C6 noted.

Hence, the purpose of this 'experiment' was not to find directions for future reforms or test the water to see whether certain measures would work. In one sense, the appointment of experiment points became a way to gradually gather experience and scale up an agenda pre-conceived by the state - it had methodological significance over substantive significance. This factor might explain in part Tiankui's initial reluctance to participate, the state's explicit intervention, and the perceived smooth implementation process with fewer conflicts and limited strategy space.

Subsequently, this bylaws formulation process did not have a substantial influence on the policy process. It started with 26 experiment points (all ministry administered national universities) – a large number and scale for an initial stage of a 'policy experiment' when compared to previous experiments. To a degree, this reflected the symbolic nature of this experiment. Within the first one or two years of the appointment, the government started to push this initiative at full scale. Unlike most previous experiments, this bylaws formulation 'experiment' was not a gradual process of 'experiment point, point-to-surface expansion, and national implementation' as delineated in Heilmann's framework. It became an 'experiment' initiative in name only. In reality, it was essentially 'a five-year plan with staged steps', as commented by B7, who worked in the MoE for decades. Therefore, this case was an experiment in the broadest sense - the policy formulation and implementation process was proceeded and promoted through experimentation.

From the state's perspective, the value of the experiment was also quite limited. As B3 interpreted it: 'Why did I have to take an experimental approach if I already knew the right way to do certain things?' The shared agreement for HEIs to establish bylaws removed the necessity of conducting an experiment to map directions or gather evidence to build consensuses. For the MoE, 'the top-level design was much more important when we were aware of what we had to do' (B3).

8.3.2 Empowerment through bylaws?

Chapter 4 provides a general discussion regarding the uniqueness of state - university relations in China. The characteristics of HEIs coupled with the sophisticated politicalisation of universities-within-the-state produce a unique organisational structure for Chinese universities. For a relatively long time, Chinese universities had no autonomy under the centrally planned system. Since 1978, HE reforms can be

interpreted as the university's quest for more autonomy and better governance from the state while the state was trying to devolve more power to the HEIs. In retrospect, it is perhaps fair to say that the situation was slowly but progressively moving in the direction of university empowerment.

As frequently reiterated in the state's official discourse, the establishment of bylaws was an integral part of the state's effort to build a 'modern university system' and was regarded as a priority for empowering university autonomy. This potential empowerment would come primarily, in theory, from two sources.

The first source was the process of allowing each individual university to formulate and personalise its bylaws through 'experiment'. In this process, the university produced a draft and negotiated with the MoE to reach a consensus regarding a set of mutually agreed upon rules that should be followed by the university and the government in the future. Each party, from its respective standpoint, participated in this 'game' in different ways. For example, Tiankui took it as an opportunity to consolidate its existing rights, to acquire more powers, and to push for future reforms; Shuisu in contrast perceived it as a task assigned by the state which it was required to fulfill, so Shuisu therefore took a more conservative approach. For the government, though the MoE repeatedly encouraged the universities to take initiatives which reflected their unique identities and characteristics in their bylaws to acquire more rights, this turned out to be much more difficult for the university to achieve in reality.

For one thing, the existing regulations left little room for the university to maneuver; and for another, the university's proposal had to go through several rounds of MoE revisions before it could be approved and published. C6 observed how this process unfolded in his institution and several other universities: 'Sometimes the MoE kept rejecting what you wanted to change. At the end, everyone was completely

exhausted.' To a degree, the formulation of bylaws in the name of a 'policy experiment' turned out in reality to be a learning process whereby the universities and the government came to understand each other's boundaries in reaching a consensus.

The second source lies in the potential significance of bylaws as 'the constitution of the university' for governing university affairs and as a set of administrative norms since it was published by the Ministry of Education.

In principle, the existing laws (such as the *Higher Education Law*) and government regulations (though ad hoc and sometimes inconsistent) endowed the rights of China's universities. They also acquired certain rights and powers through authorisation-based agreements. These authorisations were embodied in the university's bylaws (as B2 noted). Hence, these authorised bylaws, at least in theory, provided a way to empower HEIs in their future endeavors, as discussed in Tiankui's case. However, the published bylaws were heavily influenced by the state's willful interventions (either by publishing specific instructions or 'censoring' the submitted drafts). Moreover, some ideas were written in such vague terms that their implementation had to be left largely for case-by-case interpretation and negotiation. For that moment, the empowerment that the state had hoped to achieve seemed rather limited and circumscribed.

All these contingent situations might indicate that it was difficult for this initiative to lead to any fundamental changes in state-university relationships. As A22 observed, even several years after the establishment of these bylaws in universities nationwide,

> There still was no essential change in how universities operated. I would have strong reservations about saying unequivocally that the HEIs were actually empowered by participating in the bylaws formulation process or by adopting the bylaws they eventually adopted.

To a degree, this attempt at power devolution aligned closely with the state's previous attempts over the past three decades. Indeed, the government had been granting more

power to HEIs and slowly transforming itself from an interventionist role to a supervisory role. But the MoE still retained many explicit powers (such as substantial power for determining the scale of university admissions) or implicit powers (such as presenting itself as a political order to follow). The state, remains the ultimate decision-maker in a hierachial country like China.

8.4 Summary

This case investigated how the state sponsored and implemented a strategic initiative to establish and modernise bylaws (*zhang cheng*) that were (supposedly) designed to govern Chinese universities and how two representative universities responded to this initiative.

The chapter provided an in-depth description of the implementation of this broad-based reform effort. The main focus in this chapter was on how Tiankui interacted with the MoE to negotiate for a strategy space. In presenting this case, the chapter tried to identify how the institution responded to the state's actions and the obstacles the state introduced in this process through its explicit interventions. These interventions were set out as policy papers such as the *Interim Measures*, conferences, and supervisions. In the analysis, the chapter identified how Tiankui navigated and responded to these interventions and cites concrete examples of how Tiankui negotiated with the state in drafting its bylaws.

This chapter also featured Shuisu University. Shuisu's case provided a comparative perspective on how diverse institutions brought different priorities, responses, and interests to the HE policymaking process. Shuisu interpreted and responded to the government's interventions according to a different set of perceptions and interests and had different negotiating abilities. This chapter identified and analysed the key factors that influenced different institutions to come to the policymaking

process with different agendas.

In addition, this chapter argued for the particular nature of this PE effort and how it differed from previous experiments. It explored the extent to which the state used this effort to leverage and implement the government's higher education vision and impose this vision on the participating experiment points. In this way, as the chapter demonstrated, the state co-opted the PE process to coerce the participating universities to accept its priorities and used it as a methodological way to expand its purview. This chapter considered possible rationales for using a PE approach under these circumstances. In conclusion, this chapter discussed the degree of 'empowerment' which this broad-based experiment created for its participants and illuminated the power dynamics between the state and the university in a higher education system that was becoming ever more complex.

Chapter 9. Policy experiments in comparative perspective: Analysis and reflections

9.1 Introduction

The chapter presents a comparative analysis of the four individual case studies discussed in the previous chapters to develop a better understanding of policy experimentation (PE) as a policy mechanism within China's higher education (HE) policymaking and reform process.

The existing western paradigms cannot fully account for or explain the distinctive PE policy mechanism which has evolved and thrived in China's unique political, social, economic and cultural context. Therefore, the study builds on a set of strategically chosen theories, including new institutionalism (in particular historical institutionalism), multiple-streams framework and advocacy coalition framework with a focus on institutional power dynamics. It also draws upon existing scholarship on China's experimental governance. This combination is unusual.

By combining the empirical data laid out in four case studies with an informed analysis within the combined theoretical framework, this study responds to the original overarching research question: *What role has policy experimentation at public elite universities played within state-university power negotiations and higher education reforms in China?* Here 'policy experimentation' is defined as a policy process in which an experiment unit purposefully tries out a set of methods and processes, either proactively initiated by local leadership or mandated as a predefined task by the central authorities, in order to 'produce novel policy options' that may be 'injected into official policymaking and then replicated on a larger scale, or even formally incorporated into national law' (Heilmann, 2008a, p. 3). To understand PE as a distinctive way of governance in policymaking and the institutional changes which it facilitates, this study also addresses three operational questions regarding the initiation, implementation,

interaction and influence of policy experiments in China's higher education. This chapter sets out two major research findings in response to those questions.

Section 9.2 addresses the first two research questions: *(1) How are policy experiments initiated and implemented within public elite universities as experiment points? What factors influence this process?* And *(2) How do public elite universities involved in policy experiments and state actors build consensus around reforms?* 'Experiment points' (*shi dian*) refers to specific organisational units (such as the elite universities cited in this thesis) where pilot projects and model demonstrations in a policy sector are carried out. Successful experiment point(s) often expand to larger yet still limited scales through a 'from point to surface' (*you dian ji mian*) approach with constant policy modification and adaptation before national implementation. More specifically, 9.2.1 explores varying rationales for PE derived from the university actors' and state actors' different interpretations in and of policy experiments. The study further identifies strategies employed by universities and by state actors in the initiation and implementation process for the creation and maintenance of 'strategy space', referring to the discretionary room for local initiatives and experiments (9.2.2). The next section highlights the significance of university elites and state actors and their interactions. This study argues that the PE approach is an iterative process characterised by central-local interaction within intentionally ambiguous boundaries. This study argues that the China's HE governance and reform can best be described as elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies (9.2.3).

Section 9.3 addresses the third research question: *(3) How have these experiments influenced subsequent higher education reforms?* This section argues that policy experimentation has gradually become a semi-institutionalised policy mechanism for bringing about higher education reforms. In its systematic analysis, 9.3.1 first

presents a theoretical categorisation of the various types of PE which are commonly practiced in China's higher education. Building on that, the section entitled 'Empowerment by experimentation: productive, disciplinary and symbolic dimensions' (9.3.2) examines three potential dimensions of PE functions: a productive one where an experiment is used to generate plausible policy solutions; a disciplinary one where the essential use of an experiment lies in its generated regulative effect; and a symbolic one where an experiment is used in a methodological sense to expand a pre-conceived task. By placing policy experiments of different types and functions within a broader institutional environment, the study traces the changing role of PE within these interlinked reform processes (9.3.3). Section 9.3.4, entitled 'Formation of the policy experimentation approach and its continued use', explores the rationale behind the formation and adoption of this China's reform methodology as PE. It discusses the particularities embedded in China's situation and the universities' distinctive organisational characteristics and highlights the importance of taking culture into consideration to achieve a better understanding of the pragmatic mindset of Chinese people.

This study, by offering an empirical account of four reforms enabled by PE in higher education, provides a new perspective from which to understand the complicated and entangled HE policymaking process. Its focus on state-university interaction and power negotiation as they unfold in the experiment process reveals the manifold considerations and complexities that come into play in making sweeping institutional changes. 9.4 summarises the study's theoretical and empirical contributions. In doing so, it situates the findings in relation to the existing scholarship on China's 'experimental governance'.

The research findings presented in this chapter bring together the four case

studies from different junctures in China's higher education development:

At the initial stage of the Reform and Opening-up started in 1978 (Period I), a group of higher education institutions (HEIs) initiated various experiments in response to increasingly visible challenges in and beyond the HE system. Suwen's management reform experiment in Period I is an institutional initiative with national patronage (referred to as Case I in this chapter).

With the deepening of reforms, the rigid, centrally planned assignment system for university graduate employment proved unsustainable. To change this situation, from the onset of the 1980s (Period II), Tongye University and Shirui University, as state-appointed experiment points, designed and tested a series of measures such as 'supply meets demand' and 'mutual-selection' as part of a relatively expansive strategy space that gradually expanded nationwide (referred to as Case II in this chapter).

At the end of the 20th Century (Period III), the rapid pace of China's technological development drove modern distance education reforms initiated by Tanhua University (referred to as Case III in this chapter). The university proceeded with the experiment and influenced subsequent policymaking despite the state's initial opposition.

In the post-2010 era (Period IV), the state initiated a university bylaws formulation initiative as part of its broader internal governance reforms. Eventually, the 'experiment' became the prescribed paradigm nationwide for enforcing university changes. Thus, 'experimentation' became a method for expanding the limited strategy space given to the experiment points (referred to as Case IV in this chapter).

9.2 Policy experimentation as power negotiation: Individuals, institutions and environment in making institutional changes

Institutional changes often result in a combination of particular elements: individual ideas and behaviours (a collective group of powerful actors' beliefs, perceptions and actions), institutional arrangements (policy experimentation and negotiated strategy space) and contexts (broader economic, social, political and cultural changes). This section first explores and compares the different actors' interpretations of experiment-enabled reforms and the resulting rationales of policy experiments (9.2.1). The next section entitled 'Creation of strategy space in policy experiments: Central-local interplay' further explores the specific interactions and power negotiations between individuals, institutions and environment embedded in the policy experimentation process in creating strategy space (9.2.2). The last section analyses the key roles played by university elites and state actors while acknowledging and accommodating the government's ultimate control of the process.

The PE approach to HEI reforms in China is an iterative process characterised by central-local interaction and intentionally flexible and ambiguous boundaries. This section argues that PE is a power negotiation practice among stakeholders – policy actors as both norm-abiding rule followers and self-interested rational actors acting as power agents. This section explores why and how certain choices were made and why certain outcomes resulted from those choices (see Steinmo, 2008, p. 163).

9.2.1 Actors' interpretations of policy experiments

The New Instituionalism recognises the importance of how people construct meaning when they are emboldened by their interpretations of situations and behaviors. On the other hand, their beliefs and behaviors are situated in specific institutional configurations and historical parameters. There are various rationales for the state's and

the university's initiation and implementation of experiments. The stakeholders' variable and differing involvement in a policy experiment is usually based on their interpretations of their respective realities and those interpretations further shape their interest articulation and actions. Through a cross-case comparison, this chapter identifies and describes three types of rationales that motivate and drive the respective policy actors' involvement in the experimental reform process and how their understandings further influenced the initiation, implementation and interactions which characterised the power negotiations involved in those PE-enabled reforms.

Mission/ideology driven PE

The modern university, as articulated in their vision statements and mission statements, has three essential functions: teaching, research and social service. Public universities in China are part of state administration which aim to provide accessible higher education to the general public and to serve the political, social, economic and cultural development of Chinese society. This is particularly true for China's public elite universities.

Hence, a university's sense of mission becomes a frequent driver for proactively initiating reform measures for better performance in addressing the issues and challenges in society, in 'pioneering solutions' in response to those issues and challenges (A21), and in making 'a bigger contribution to the [well-being of] society' (A3). Often this sense of mission is reflected as a set of values and beliefs shared by a collective group of leaders within a university who are able to use their endowed power within the institution to acquire the external resources needed for the university to initiate reforms and changes.

For example, as described in Case III, ideas and beliefs played a central role in the initiation of the experiment when Tanhua's leaders decided that it was their

responsibility to find new ways to solve the tension created by the increasing demand for high-quality educational and the shortfall in the supply of resources to fund that effort. The university's stakeholders involved believed that they were able to negotiate with and persuade the state's administrative authorities because their reform initiative was 'mission-driven' and so aligned with the government's core interest in creating benefits for the overall society in the long term.

Problem/strategy driven PE

As discussed above, sometimes educators can resort to their long-term vision and entrepreneurship as key factors in initiating reforms, but at other times a policy experiment is primarily driven by the emergence of an unanticipated problem, either within the institution (such as Case I) or external to the institution (such as Case II). These emergent problems can either be identified by the university (such as Case I) or by the state (though it is fair to claim that the state's ultimate recognition of a problem may be precipitated, often behind the scenes, from reports and appeals from the university, as in Case II). An identified problem can provide the immediate impetus to bring the affected parties to engage in solution-seeking activities. As noted by C6, 'When you ran into a problem you were forced to change'. In this case, the PE approach and process often functioned as a plausible mechanism for launching such experimental efforts to explore the perceived problem and for testing and evaluating alternative means to solving it. This flexible approach was frequently adopted in the 1980s and 1990s when political, social, and economic changes were occurring rapidly and there were fewer tested and proven precedents for elite policy actors to rely on, so they had to proceed with the reform process in a 'cross the river by feeling the stones' fashion. This contingency factor might also explain why universities were given quite a large degree of freedom to initiate a relatively open strategy space for forging and implementing

their experimental approaches. After all, the university had the specialist knowledge and first-hand experience to identify and understand HE issues.

For example, in Case I, Suwen designed and implemented its innovative reform measures in response to immediate and pressing problems: the society's ideological devotion to absolute egalitarianism and anti-competitive stance resulted in the university accruing a highly inefficient and rigid management system which resulted at the time in poor treatment for its academics. Hence, Suwen's policy entrepreneurs designed specific strategies targeting that emergent problem. For the same reason, the state granted Suwen the expanded policy space to find ways to solve its managerial problems because many other institutions were experiencing the very same type of management problem. So, in essence, the state utilised Suwen's expertise and skills to discover new solutions to nagging problems that had become endemic to the higher education system. When Suwen's solutions proved plausible, the state retrospective authorised and endorsed them by formally citing the results in the central government's annual report and then by encouraging other universities to adopt the Suwen paradigm.

Take Case II as another example, Tongye University and Shirui Univeristy jointly developed and tested a set of experimental strategies designed to reform the then rigid and increasingly unsustainable university graduate employment assignment system. The primary task for the two appointed experiment points was to map out strategies for modifying and testing the possible outcomes of using these strategies. Once the experiment units had proven the feasibility of these strategies, the state had the evidence it needed to sponsor broad-based reforms for China's university system.

Directives/Administration driven PE

In some cases, innovative policy reforms were driven by administrative orders rather than by a university's sense of mission or by the need to address an immediate

problem or issue. In cases like this, the government often acted as the top-down initiator of a certain experiment, either in response to a high-level leaders' orders or as an integral part of a larger higher education policy reform initiative. The university, by and large, participated in the state's project as the experiment point, proceeding with the experiment according to the government's directions to fulfill an administrative task. In general, these cases allowed universities rather limited space to maneuver, but this sort of top-down mandate created a much clearer route for the 'experiment' in question to enter the policy process.

Case IV provides an illuminating example. The MoE's initiation of the top-down bylaws formulation project (as part of a bigger experiment to improve university internal governance) had its origins with certain ideas of the state's top leaders. In the initiative's implementation stage, the MoE micro-managed the activities and constantly intervened in the decision-making process (by publishing *Tentative Measures* for example). The MoE exacted from every HEI mandatory compliance with these measures even while certain designated institutions were still 'experimenting' with the process. So by definition, this MoE directed inititiative, in its conception and execution, did not fit the narrow definition of 'experimentation' that we have seen with those driven by a sense of mission, by an innovative vision, or by challenges or necessities. The bylaws project was mainly an administration driven 'experiment' for methodologically mandating changes at the HEI level.

The three possible rationales are drawn from the stakeholders' interpretations of the situation. They do not work alone. In a single experiment, almost all the drivers and motivators leave their traces, but their respective influences on the outcomes get weighted differently and create variable outcomes. These rationales, in turn, further influenced actors' behaviors in carrying out these policy experiments.

9.2.2 Creation of strategy space in policy experiments: Central-local interplay

There are two intertwined mega-factors which influence institutional changes: exogenous shocks and the internal contradictions in the existing logics. Experimentation is a mechanism for getting to institutional change when confronted by these shocks and logics (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). In this process, the respective agents' ideas and behaviors (as reflected in state-university interactions) tend to become constrained and confined by the existing institutional arrangements and their social contexts, influencing the results (negotiated strategy space and experiment outcomes).

Through a collective analysis of the four cases, this section focuses on the balance of power in the interaction between elite universities as experiment points and the central government. The section argues that PE can act as a significant catalyst by creating an expanded strategy space with volatile but mutually agreed boundaries that can facilitate power negotiations and consensus-building for introducing HE reforms.

For one thing, institutions use PE to develop, test, and evaluate innovative initiatives, build evidence and persuade policy actors of their utility. For another, the state applies the PE approach to deliver its objectives and introduce its desired changes in a more receptive way. Either way, the PE approach provides a structured but flexible mechanism for getting local elites and government officials to interact and often open up an expanded strategy space in which the university is able to maneuver and experiment. In one sense, this expanded strategy space becomes an 'officially protected space' within which the university becomes a government designated 'experiment point' and is encouraged to explore innovative or even unorthodox strategies and measures. The PE approach can be particularly affective when political communication from the top down tends to be vague and deliberately (or not) allows for expanded local interpretation. Policy experimentation, therefore, becomes a lens for observing how

those processes developed and guided many of China's higher education reforms.

From the university perspective, this study identifies two potential strategies used in the process: 'bargaining and persuasion', especially through appeals to specialist knowledge and relevant experience; and 'formation of advocacy coalition', usually embracing university stakeholders and state officials. There are comparative degrees of utilising these two strategies among the cases discussed in this thesis.

Bargaining and persuasion

The policy experiments which have been used in China's higher education policymaking and reform process have usually been accompanied with constant bargaining, normally the university trying to persuade the administrative authorities to allow them to use certain innovative or extraordinary strategies and measures to reach a policy objective. The persuasive element is built in to and implied by the 'experiment(al)' designation. This 'experiment' designation implies that the university and state stakeholders have more than usual latitude, on an ongoing basis, to negotiate how the meaning of 'experiment(al)' will be mutually understood in their working relationship. This is a plausible approach especially since the university presumably brings to the table the specialist knowledge and first-hand experience regarding issues in higher education. As articulated by A11, 'Our main task was to demonstrate the legitimacy of the university's request by appealing to its accrued expertise.' Notably, the bargaining and persuasion often focuses on specific strategies or approaches, whereas the broad policy objectives most often have already been set out by the state authorities through policy documents, directives, leaders' speeches, and national conferences, etc.

This approach is reflected in varying degrees in the discussions of all of this thesis's case studies. For example, in case III, Tanhua University was keen to push its

modern distance education experiment. Therefore, it creatively utilised a range of strategies to negotiate with the MoE for more strategy space to maneuver and persuade its administrative authorities for approval. In contrast, in the graduate employment assignment reform (in Case II), the two designated experiment points were already given an expanded strategy space to explore and experiment, so there was less of a necessity for them to 'bargain' with the state. For them, the primary task became more of a question of how to build sufficient evidence to prove the utility of the designed strategy and achieve its consideration for inclusion in the policymaking process.

Sometimes, the degree of 'bargaining and persuasion' differed even among different experiment points in the same policy experiment. For example, the back-and-forth process in formulating bylaws at Tiankui University (as discussed in Case IV) demonstrates how a university could manage to create room to negotiate with the state even when the experiment's given parameters already seemed rather concrete and specific. In contrast, Shuisu University, by and large, followed the state's instructions; the resulting outcome, therefore, was perceived as less satisfactory by the actors involved. Since the nature and type of the PE and institutional environment it was facing was the same, such difference mainly derived from the different policy preferences of the actors and their respective resources. In this case, agency and their ideas became key to the strategy chosen and outcome achieved.

Advocacy coalitions formation

The advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1988; 1993) argues that policy changes often result from competitive interactions among coalitions within a policy subsystem and events outside the subsystem. Hence, the optimal strategy when facing multiple actors is to engage those with similar beliefs and ideas into advocacy coalitions. Certainly, this is not unique to PE-enabled reforms. But it is

argued that experimental initiatives, especially bottom-up ones, particularly require advocacy coalitions because they are generally more controversial, with less clearly defined boundaries and thus more maneuverable strategy space.

Universities commonly employ the advocacy coalition approach, either by proactively seeking (mostly seen in institutional initiatives) or voluntarily acquiring (mostly seen in state-sponsored projects) coalitions to support its cause and get its experiment placed on the national policy agenda. The necessity of the formation and visibility of the advocacy coalition's influence clearly differs in different policy experiments. For example, in those administration driven policy experiments (such as Case IV), the necessity for the MoE to form a coalition was small given China's centralised institutional structure with its public universities subject to the administration of the MoE.

In other cases, the significance of engaging multiple actors at different levels (institutional leaders, local government officials, ministerial level officials, state leaders) becomes clearer. For example, in Case I, Suwen's leaders actively sought support from high-level officials for their reforms. They invited the then MoE Minister (their direct administrative authority) to act as the Vice-President of the University Council and the then Vice Premier to act as the President of the University Council. In this way, Suwen engaged the state's central leadership on its into its administrative team. They in turn paved the way for Suwen's fast track reforms and provided a visible and influential model for other stakeholders and universities. In contrast, Wantong University was not so fortunate. During the same period, their initiative failed. Their failure may be attributed to the fact that its leader failed to seek support from politically influential state leaders. Tanhua University can be cited as another revealing example. Tanhua succeeded in acquiring the then Vice Premier's support. In one stroke, Tanhua

legitimatised its initiative and acquired the leverage they needed to turn MoE's active opposition to active support. As a result, Tanhua's project gained momentum in the planning process and eventually became the basis for a national change in policy and a national act.

In this coalition formation process, the policy actors are still key – their abilities to form and effectively utilise the advantages of an advocacy can have a determining influence on the success of power negotiations and even the outcome of a policy experiment.

From a state perspective, it communicates with the experiment point through two major channels: 'documentary politics' (i.e. using documents to either set a policy agenda for the university to find ways to achieve or regulate its behavior) or 'open method of coordination', including such mechanisms as conferences and site visits. Similarly, given the state's different stances taken and differing levels of involvement in each experiment, the utilisation of these strategies and their respective roles are different.

'Documentary politics'

In China, 'documentary politics' (Wu, 1995, p. 24) refers to the constant use of government documents (*wen jian*) in ruling over and regulating affairs. The 'rule-of-documents' has been a long-standing tradition in China (Jing, 2013). Publishing (political) documents is one of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) most common ways to communicate its official directives (contrast China's 'rule of documents' with the comparable role of constitutions and laws in Western democracies). In addition, the CPC, its State Council and its governing ministries' decisions, instructions, opinions, regulations, notices and explanations are all legally binding at issue (Law, 2002). These official documents reflect the consensus of China's leaders and bear legitimacy and authority, both symbolically and administratively.

Therefore, in policy experiments, an important way for the state to communicate with the officially designated university experiment points is through the publication of policy documents of various types – e.g. those published by the MoE as administrative orders and those published by the State Council to set grand policy objectives among others. This mechanism has been commonly cited in the cases discussed in this thesis.

On some occasions, the relevant authority sets a policy target for experiment points to achieve without specifying the means for reaching that target. Thus, the relevant authority in effect allows the possibility of more strategy space to create strategy. For example, in Case II, the state hoped that the two experiment points would be able to come up with innovative ways to reform the university graduates' employment assignment system without disrupting the ongoing operations of higher education, the planned economy and the social order.

On some other occasions, the government publishes more detailed documents that 'impose' interventions and regulations on the implementation of an experiment. A typical example is Case IV, in which the MoE constantly published regulations regarding benchmarks for finishing various phases of bylaws formulation and what should be included in its content. The document then served as a way to delineate the boundaries of the space given to the experiment points.

'Open method of coordination'

Another common way the state uses to communicate and interact with experiment points is through conferences and site visits, referred to as 'open method of coordination' in this thesis. The frequent utilisation of this method during experiments is clearly reflected in the case studies. For example, in Case III, China's then Vice Premier endorsed Tanhua's experiment in an official visit to the Tanhua' campus. Though not his visit's major purpose, his physical presence and proximity empowered

Tanhua's distance education project and gave it sanction and support.

In China, conferences held during the initiation, implementation and expansion of an experiment could be used for different purposes: as a way to publish regulations and give orders, to gather feedback and information regarding certain experiments, or to advocate and share certain experience of experiment points and benchmarking. It is not a unique approach to PE, but one applicable to almost all reforms happened in China. It does, in experiment process, allow an open forum for direct communication between the university and the state.

9.2.3 Elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies

This study further argues that China's policy experimentation is essentially an iterative process that involves multiple rounds of negotiations between multiple levels of stakeholders; hence, it maintains an ambiguous boundary for experiments and reforms. In the process, elite policy entrepreneurs, referring to leaders of elite universities and national patrons, are a key factor in the initiation, implementation, interaction and incorporation of policy experiments. In one sense, China's HE policymaking can be understood as elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies.

Multiple rounds of negotiations between multiple levels of stakeholders

Theories of agenda setting such as the Multiple-Streams Framework (MSF) and Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) focus on the interaction among multiple actors and advocacy coalitions and how those interactions couple with external factors (such as policy problems and political necessities) to create policy changes. In the thesis's four case studies with all their peculiarities, PE works to bring forward a certain pathway out of an ambiguous policy situation toward reform. The decision-making is mediated through constant negotiations between various stakeholders. Mainly the

Ministry of Education (MoE) and elite universities as experiment points are the stakeholders, but occasionally the local government (such as in Case I where Suwen University needed to report to and appeal to city S regarding its reform measures), other state ministries (such as in Case III in which the State Radio Regulatory Commission granted Tanhua's satellite broadcasting approval request), and social actors (such as in Case II where work units as employers played an integral part) come into play.

For policy experiments initiated in a bottom-up fashion, the university as experiment point (particularly its leaders) act as policy entrepreneurs in identifying problems and exploring possible policy solutions. A successful policy entrepreneur usually possesses at least five characteristics: a leadership position and proven leadership skills; expertise; political connections; negotiating skill; and persistence (Kingdon, 1984, p. 189-190). These qualities can be identified in the major actors described in the case studies. For example, the leaders of Tanhua University used their resources and negotiating skills to persuade relevant MoE officials to allow the Tanhua experiment move forward. It was due to their persistence that the Tanhua experiment was carried out and made an impact on distance education throughout China. Those policy entrepreneurs also identified potential advocates, often within the state bureaucracies, and engaged them with advocacy coalitions which shared their beliefs and interests. The advocacy coalition formed by a multiplicity of actors can act as policy advocate(s) for identified innovative strategies. For example, in Case I, leaders from Suwen University actively (and successfully) aligned the university's PE strategy with ministerial and national leaders shared beliefs (i.e., the necessity of HE reform). They used the tested strategies as gathered evidence to prove the 'technical feasibility' and 'value acceptability' (Kingdon, 1984, p.138) of those experimental measures. Once such criteria are fulfilled, the policy entrepreneurs are then in a position to strongly

advocate the putting of the identified problems and potential policy solutions onto the national policy agenda.

For PE efforts that bear more of a top-down imprint, the role of policy entrepreneurs at the institutional level becomes one of exploring policy options rather than identifying problems and challenges. In this sense, for a state-initiated experiment, the role of an advocacy coalition becomes relatively less important. The question becomes how the designed and trialed innovative policy options are able to build enough evidence (particularly regarding replicability and timeliness) to enable their expansion on a larger scale. Once again, this often has to do with the receptivity at the time of the institutional environment. This type of PE effort has a clearer pathway to enter the national policy process.

In either case, such a pathway generally has three elements.

First, China frequently uses a gradually institutionalised PE approach to introducing reforms which provides a unique shortcut for inclusion of local initiatives. In one sense, this approach reflects the government's and the policy system's capability of recognising, accepting and utilising policy experiments.

Second, there must be an appropriate and receptive institutional environment. For example, in Case II, the deepening economic and social reforms encouraged and to a degree allowed for more free choice in employment, an element of competition and individual mobility, making the 'supply meets demand' and 'mutual selection' methods potentially plausible. But this initiative in Case II also encountered significant constraints in the social environment. When the initiative started, there was still no adequate market mechanism or a mature enough labor market to allow enough flexibility for its total implementation. That was a major reason that this reform could only proceed on an experimental basis and in an incremental fashion.

Third, the opening of a policy window, particularly for bottom-up experiments, can facilitate their initiation and successful implementation. Take Case III as an example. The drafting of the *Action Plan for Educational Revitalization to Face the 21st Century Action Plan* (1998), a national education reform policy paper, gave the Tanhua experiment an opportunity to enter the policy process.

In sum, a combination of actors (policy entrepreneurs and advocacy coalitions) and institutional arrangements (policy experimentation) has created an expanded space for the universities to develop experimental strategies for impacting HE reforms in China. It is also important to note that the state in this policy arena has not behaved so monolithically. As we can see in the case studies, the state often has deferred to the specific expertise and specialised experience of the policy entrepreneurs at the university level. This mode of operation has proven especially effective in confronting problems and addressing issues in HE, with each party maintaining its own agenda and rationales. For example, in the distance education experiment (Case III), Tanhua created the flexibility to bypass the MoE and appeal to the State Radio Regulatory Commission of the People's Republic of China and the Beijing Radio Regulatory Commission to acquire a certificate for building a satellite broadcasting station. Tanhua was also able to engage certain national leaders to support its initiative. In response, the MoE had to drop its opposition and support the project. But the MoE changed its strategy in such a way as to dilute Tanhua's privilege and put itself in charge of the distance education project by appointing more experiment points and eventually getting the initiative put on the national policy agenda. Such are the political realities of HE policy-making in China.

An ambiguous boundary around experimental reforms

From the comparative account of the four case studies, I have been able to

demonstrate that the policy entrepreneurs, including the leaders of China's elite universities and high-level state officials, are the keys to success in the PE process. Their ideas and behaviors, by and large, affect the shaping of the negotiated strategy space and the experiment outcomes. This key element is particularly apparent in a vague and often ambiguous policy environment.

When elite university leaders assume the role of policy entrepreneurs, they are able to access and to utilise a range of strategies for interacting with their administrative authorities in their conducting of institutional experiments. What makes some of them successful, as discussed in this study, is that these policy entrepreneurs are active innovators; to a man, they are not always passive rule-followers who fear the potential obstacles put in their way by the Chinese government. Their perception of autonomy, often translated as *'zi zhu'* ('self-mastery'), alludes to their detached mindset of semi-independence: a traditional mindset for Chinese scholars who proactively seek a high level of convergence of interest articulation between themselves and the state. These policy entrepreneurs have the ineffable presence of mind and the ability to interpret and to behave with 'obedient autonomy' (Evasdottir, 2004). This capacity in part explains the degree to which they have been able to proactively initiate changes and negotiate with the state while aligning their behaviors with the national interests. As discussed ealier, often they have to acquire the support and advocacy of high-level state officials to negotiate an expanded strategy space and cultivate favorable terms for maneuver. Not all university officials have the sophistication and presence of mind to succeed at that game. After all, the endowment of high-level state officials can always play an unpredictable yet critical role.

On certain occasions, these policy entrepreneurs have shown that they can also be adept at forming advocacy coalitions with like-minded university and state officials,

either explicitly or implicitly, to back up their experiments or institutionally driven experimental measures (discussed in 9.2.2 Advocacy coalitions formation).

On certain other occasions, an experiment might initially come from an idea or the advocacy of certain national leaders or the state's overall vision for HE development, though the actual development and implementation is completed through an individual experiment point(s). These high-level state leaders' ideological orientations or reform intentions often leave a traceable imprint on the government's plans and the university leaders' perceptions of them. For example, in Case IV, the original push to build a 'modern university system' featuring university bylaws derived from certain national leaders' speeches. Those ideas later became incorporated and embodied in the MoE's policies and papers.

In hindsight, sometimes the lines can get blurred regarding whose ideas were ultimately driving those initiatives – the university, the state, or the consensual two?

And herein lies the profound potential possibility of being able to conduct these experiments in a flexible policy environment with malleable boundaries and an expandable strategy space. As we have seen from the analysis of the case studies, these policy experiments often come about as a result of or in response to the government's ambivalent political communications and policy messages. In one sense, the government may be said to establish these vague and ambiguous boundaries intentionally to encourage and to allow university policy entrepreneurs to take up innovative strategies and initiatives for their potential influence on policymaking. As demonstrated in the analysis of the cases, these initiatives inevitably have been shaped by these policy entrepreneurs and their preferences in their constant active interactions and power negotiations with the state's actors.

From examining the various policy experiments China has conducted in higher education in past decades, we can readily perceive that the ways and means of interaction and negotiation, the strategy space that creates, and the flow of power that results can differ broadly from project to project. There are many variables which influence these outcomes.

In China, this innovative PE approach to policymaking is still an elite-elite game involving carefully selected elite national universities and state officials. In general, the elite universities have access to more channels and resources to navigate. For example, for an elite university with an extended alumni network within the state bureaucracies, its ideas and thoughts probably get channelled to the relevant officials through informal meetings. And its leaders often have a better grasp and comprehension about the national leaderships' intentions through their interactions so they may be in a position to propose experimental reforms that resonate better with the nation's leaders.

But the status of the university in question is certainly not the most important factor influencing the manner and outcome of a particular policy experiments. Often it is the vision and capacity of university leaders. It is often their ability to acquire strategy space for the university to explore and experiment. In China, the government, in particular the MoE, is accountable for HEIs since the majority of China's universities are public institutions, so it is legitimate that the nation-state has its own requirements and expectations regarding public universities. But within this same monolithic national HE governance system, individual institutions might operate in different ways. So there is a potential policy space that exists between the macro-system and the micro-operation of individual HEIs to use. A university's development often depends on how effectively it utilises that space. The PE approach provides a mechanism for its creative use. As noted by A8, 'PE enables the possibility for communication and interaction with

Chinese characteristics - we appeal our idea to the government; on the other hand, they propose their own ideas and we respond.' It is a negotiation process. In this sense, PE provides a platform and a process for those interactions and negotiations between the state and the university to build a consensus for reforms.

Yet, that process and its attendant negotiations are still contained in and constrained by the hierarchical framework posed by the polity. On many occasions, it depends on the 'wisdom' of university leaders and how well they handle themselves as policy entrepreneurs, especially because that the boundaries for reforms are not always clear and always subject to shifts in the political and social configurations of Chinese society. As Zhu (2007) put it, 'If the [policy] documents had been taken seriously, no reform would have happened' (p. 1504). The often deliberately vague political communications and ambiguous policy objectives render the whole process open to local interpretations and negotiations. On many occasions, the policy documents often do provide policy objectives or simply an ideological orientation, but leaving ample room for the universities to explore and experiment with additional possibilities with the government tacitly holding out the potential for *ex post* justification and policy selection. University leaders need to read 'between the lines' in order to acquire more strategy space – sometimes it is just as important to listen for what the state does not say as for what it does say. A2 carefully described the negotiation process in similar terms:

> When there were conflicts, one had to know how to listen to the state's messages, to understand their intentions, and sometimes to persuade them. One had to use all kinds of resources to get the state to recognise you—this is the wisdom of the Chinese people and the Chinese way of bringing about reforms.

Institutions often accommodate compromises between different powerful actors and between powerful actors and the relevant institutional contexts (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Dodds, 2011). It is therefore important to understand the emergence and maintenance of the institutional logics involved in PE. The established and mutually

agreed on institutional logics that organisations follow, in turn, shape actors' behaviors. The four strategies identified in 9.2.2 are formed and utilised by elite policy actors in China's HE development. Their ideas and behaviors are, by and large, products of the particular set of social, political, economic and cultural processes in operation at a given time. These processes and interactions are enabled through the existing institutional arrangement as policy experiments, and in turn, subject to the constraints posed by those arrangements, in particular the nature of the public universities and their administrative ties to the state.

In other words, state-university interactions still operate under China's political configuration and social context. China's universities are public institutions subject to government orders – the government sponsors and funds all public universities. The central government holds the ultimate power in shaping the course of policy experiments, particularly as shown in its selective control of PE in explaining, justifying and selecting after it has already taken place (Liu, 2010). Therefore, though the strategy space boundary in an experiment is malleable, the manner of state-university interaction and the resulting outcome is still constrained within the limits of China's hierarchical framework. This type of environment is what is described in the term 'experimentation under hierarchy' or 'experimentation under the shadow of hierarchy' or 'experimentation under hierarchy under local conditions' (Heilmann, 2008a; Heilmann et al., 2013; Tsai & Dean, 2014). Through a detailed account of four cases studies and a comparative analysis, this study proposes that China's HE policymaking can be best understood as elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies.

9.3 Policy experimentation as a semi-institutionalised mechanism

Based on its tracing of China's PE development trajectory and analysing its impact through four in-depth case studies, this study argues that the PE approach to higher education policymaking in China has become a widely accepted and readily used semi-institutionalised mechanism for making reforms. The term 'semi-institutionalised' is meant to connote that the frequent use of policy experiments by the state and public universities has become an institutional arrangement for involving the central government and HE institutions in a dynamic interactive process for bringing about innovation, reform and institutional change in China's HE. The central government has adopted the PE approach as a shortcut for introducing state-initiated policy experiments into the broader policy process. Meanwhile, the universities and educational institutions have adapted the PE approach as a conscious tool for initiating changes of their own and have used it to negotiate for enhanced leverage with the central government and as a defensive measure to protect their autonomy from central government encroachment. Meanwhile, no formal protocol has been developed regarding how these policy experiments are to be initiated, implemented and incorporated into the state planning process. The boundaries of the strategy spaces that have been created and their resultant outcomes often have been volatile and largely subject to the actors' behaviors and the broader environment in the corresponding periods.

To make a systematic analysis of the role of PE in China's higher education reform, 9.3.1 first presents a theoretical categorisation of the various types of PE which have been actively used in China's higher education. Building on that, this section then explores three dimensions of PE functions in the section entitled 'Empowerment by experimentation: productive, disciplinary and symbolic dimensions (9.3.2). 9.3.3 places these different types of PE and their respective functions within a broader institutional

environment to trace the changing role of PE in the reform process. The last part, entitled 'Formation of the policy experimentation and its continued use' (9.3.4), explores the rationales behind the formation, adoption and continued use of this distinctive indigenous reform methodology as policy experimentation in China's HE.

9.3.1 A theoretical categorisation of policy experiments

Through a comparative account of four case studies, the previous section highlighted the similar modes of operation shared in those policy experiments. Nonetheless, they also demonstrated their many differences, and these also merit our attention so that we can acquire a more systematic understanding of how the PE approach gets applied in China's higher education context. In particular, there are two key factors which account for much of the difference from such a comparison.

First, how does the PE process get initiated and who are the initial policy entrepreneurs? Project experiments, as we have seen, tend to be top-down or bottom-up. They can also combine features of both. But the 'manner of initiation' goes beyond top-down and bottom-up. The manner of initiation has the potential to influence the ways and means of getting it into the national policy process. There are many different possibilities. For institutional initiatives, they must find a path to enter the policy process to make a greater impact – the process requires more than simply building convincing evidence to prove the success of a specific reform measure and its replicability. It also depends on the capacity of the sponsoring advocacy coalition, the policy environment, and the project's political feasibility. For state-sponsored projects, the path is much more clearly defined.

Second, how does a project experiment get implemented? This involves a closer look at the various attitudes of the stakeholders and their levels of involvement in the process. For example, for the management reform case (Case I), the state took a

relatively detached stance, while the relevant universities assumed a more proactive role. In the distance education reform case (Case III), in contrast, the MoE took a more active role. For the university graduate employment assignment reform (Case II) and the bylaws formulation project (Case IV), the stateinitiated and supported both experiments, but the degree of intervention and the universities' relative levels of enthusiasm for the project differed—these differences account in large part for the differences in the scopes of strategy space being negotiated and how they were utilised in the process.

Based on these two factors and their implicated dimensions, Figure 10 presents a categorisation which captures the different modes for conducting policy experiments as part of the policy and reform process in HE in contemporary China.

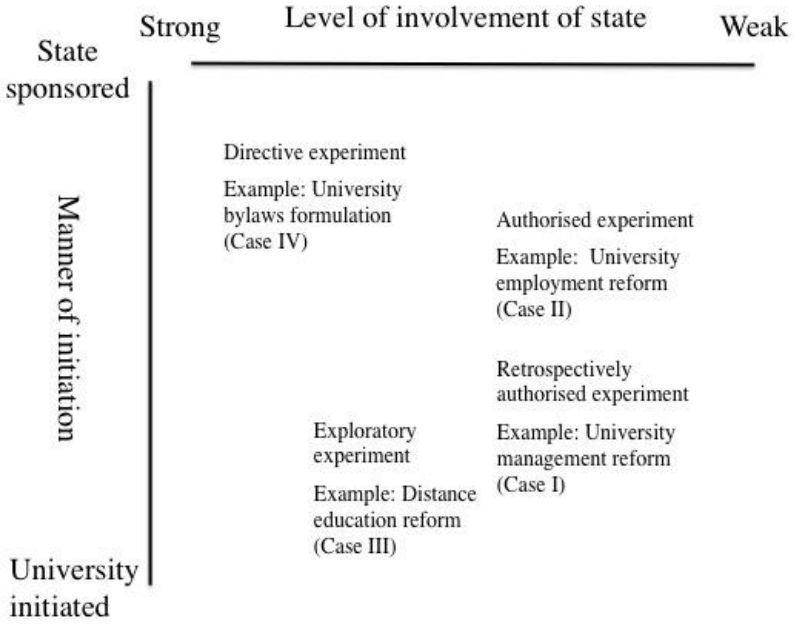


Figure 10 **A theoretical categorisation of policy experiments in China's higher education**

Then there is the 'directive experiment'. The directive experiment refers to an experiment that is primarily sponsored by the state with its frequent intervention during

the implementation phase carried out by the university as the experiment point. The experiment is, by and large, a methodological and symbolical way for expanding a pre-conceived task. There is a clear route for this type of PE to be incorporated into the national policy process; sometimes the expansion phase happens concomitantly with the experiment's implementation phase. Case IV was a good example of this type of PE. It was a state-advocated initiative with limited strategy space granted to the experiment points. The state constantly published regulations as a way of intervention and a clear timetable for its completion.

An 'authorised experiment' can also be initiated by state actors, who delegate the power to carry it out to a university as the experiment point. The university then works out the design and then implements and tests the innovative policy options that may be replicated on a larger scale to achieve a certain goal. In this type of experiment, the state keeps the strategy space given to the experiment point relatively open, generally in the expectation that the university can find innovative ways to map solutions when there are no existing precedents or procedures to follow. As shown in Case II, though Tongye University and Shirui University were state-appointed experiment points, they enjoyed a large degree of freedom in trying out new measures to reform the then existing but problematic university graduate employment assignment system.

A 'retrospectively authorised experiment' refers to an experiment that is promoted and driven by a university, usually with informal state recognition and support. The government gives retrospective recognition and authorisation, either during the experiment's latter stages of implementation or in the expansion phase. Case I is an example of this sort, where Suwen University proposed and conducted certain innovative experiments in response to perceived problems while actively appealing to

the state for support and broader influence. Hence, the university and the state maintained a reasonably broad and flexible strategy space to accommodate their creative experimental effort.

Finally, an 'exploratory experiment' refers to an experiment that is proactively initiated by a university based on its vision for reform and change. The initiator explores the possible innovative policy options without a clear route to the policy process. The state might take a distant, opposing or acquiescent stance. Hence, the openness of the strategy space needs to be negotiated. As shown in Case III, Tanhua University was able to carry out its vision for modern distance education due to its strategic interaction with different state actors, but it faced initial opposition of certain state actors and regulations at a later stage.

The four types described above provide an analytical framework for understanding the key elements which influence the course of policy experiments in China's higher education. It needs to be understood in a dynamic sense under the propositions discussed in the previous section. The main objective is not to outline the categorical differences but to come to a better understanding of what factors influence and determine the types of policy experiments and their manners of initiation, implementation and integration.

9.3.2 Empowerment by experimentation? The productive, disciplinary and symbolic dimensions

The way in which the China's PE approach has evolved into what it is today is interesting and important in and of itself. This study argues that PE, originated from China's war period, evolved from an informal policy tool that was used in an ad hoc fashion in response to the large scale emerging problems in the wake of China's Reform and Opening Up. Overtime, the approach gradually became semi-institutionalised in the

ongoing policymaking and reform process. The approach's broad-based acceptance and utility was demonstrated first by its success in getting individuals and institutions to work together in the highly politicised and volatile policymaking environment that emerged after 1978 (discussed in 9.2). The approach itself proved to be pragmatic and flexible enough to successfully navigate a myriad of contingencies and get the job done. Its proven utility gradually attracted more adherents and generated more success stories. By now it is generally accepted as an effective policymaking and reform process. This section discusses its productive, symbolic, and disciplinary dimensions.

Productive dimension

The 'productive dimension' refers to PE's potential to generate plausible innovative policy options, solutions, and operational findings that can then be replicated on a broader regional or national scale. The flexibility of the PE approach provides the involved actors with an opportunity to circumvent existing restrictions in exploring new strategies for institutional change and to evaluate the impact of the possible outcomes of these strategies. The limited scale of a typical planning experiment makes it a stable, controlled, and inexpensive method for testing innovative approaches. And the elite-elite negotiations and resultant (expanded) strategy space also increase its efficiency. As C4 observed, 'It might explain why the most economically robust areas [today] were in the 1980s and 1990s those same experiment zones'.

The PE approach's main advantage was its built-in flexibility. Again and again, it proved particularly useful when a certain reform effort could not proceed 'according to law'. In these cases, the government had to resort to 'authorised experimentation' to get around the existing regulations or to allow local initiatives by taking a supportive or acquiescent stance and give them retrospective authorisation later if they worked out.

This productive dimension proved especially useful at the beginning of the

Reform and Opening-up when 'almost every reform in every sector used this valuable tool for policy experimentation to cross the river' (A11). Case II is a typical example. Under a centrally planned economy, almost every aspect of higher education – for example, admission, funding, teaching and graduation – was interdependent and subject to central planning. To attempt to change the then university graduate employment assignment system a large scale was both implausible and unwise, even though the emerging problems of the old system were demonstrating the necessity for doing so. It was also difficult for the government to predict the potential outcome of a specific reform strategy and its impact on this highly volatile and interdependent system. Confronted with this dilemma, the government appointed two universities as experiment points: first to explore and design new strategies to solve the problem and second to test the designed strategies on a small local scale to 'test the water'. Hence, the PE approach produced viable policy options and then allowed for controlled evidence building to reach a consensus among powerful actors within the state's bureaucracies, higher education system and society to adapt such a policy option.

Disciplinary dimension

PE's 'disciplinary dimension' refers to the regulative power generated by and through the experimentation process. It is generally reflected through the regulation of experiment points by hosting conferences, publishing regulations, etc. In a way, initiating and implementing policy experiments accompanied with regulations created a protocol for other universities to follow and conform.

For example, in Case III, when the modern distance education project became a state-sponsored experiment, the MoE's various regulations imposed on those initial experiment points provided a disciplinary order for other institutions to imitate and follow. This disciplinary dimension represents, to a degree, a more scientific approach

for HEIs to accept and utilise since it has developed in university settings through experimentation in practice.

Symbolic dimension

The 'symbolic dimension' corresponds to those experiments that aim to build a new image and serve as a demonstration or model project for replication and gradual expansion. This type of experiment is generally initiated by the central authorities with a pre-conceived task and then expanded in staged phases for expansion. For this kind of initiative, the strategy space can be rather limited since the primary aim and role of the policy experiment is not to explore new policy options and develop effective regulations, but for the government to acquire or consolidate legitimacy for its policy agenda and propel the inertia of HEIs towards conformity.

Case IV discussed in this thesis is an example. To a degree, the procedure of establishing bylaws to improve internal university governance, an important government agenda, was clear. The appointment of 26 experiment points (a relatively large number) to firstly engage in this effort was to use them as demonstrations for other universities. The government's agenda became especially clear when the state published a timeline to push other universities to follow the initiative even before the 26 experiment points had finished formulating their bylaws.

These three dimensions have demonstrated varying degrees of usage in China's HE experiments. In a policy experiment that encompasses 'experiment point – proceeding from point to surface - national implementation' one can see all these dimensions interacting though at certain times one may be foregrounded.

Over time, these functions allowed limited empowerment for China's HEIs.

First, by allowing universities, either as officially appointed experiment points, or as universities that able to acquire permission to pioneer changes, to explore and

experiment certain innovative measures that might contradict or breakthrough existing restrictions requires leeway. Such leeway generally comes from certain endowed rights or at least permission. For example, Tongye University and Shirui University were 'allowed to use 'supply meets demand' and 'mutual selection' as acceptable features for their graduate employment system even though most other universities were subject to the national central plan for making employment assignments. These endowed rights can be regarded as substantial form of empowerment since the university in question required it to proceed with its reform experiments. As A10 repeatedly observed:

> If the government wanted institutions to reform, it had to give them some freedom to break with existing regulations and restrictions. [But] empowerment itself was not the purpose for the experiment—it was because an experiment requires certain forms of empowerment to proceed.

In the PE operating mode, though, the granting of these exceptions or waivers was normally conveyed to a limited number of universities and lasted for a limited time until the privilege was rescinded (when an experiment fails) or diluted (when an experiment is replicated at a larger scale or even implemented nationally). Take Case III as another example. Between 1996 and 1999, Tanhua University was allowed to administer distance education programmes using new methods, equipment, and technologies that were not even available yet to the then dominant China Central Radio and TV University. From 1999 onwards, the MoE began a concerted effort to devolve certain powers to universities on a larger scale (68 in total in 2004 – from point to surface), including unprecedented autonomy in admission, administration, examination and graduation. In a sense, Tanhua's privilege was diluted while their unique empowerment was shared out to other experiment points.

Regarding China's experience with the PE approach, it has been argued that its existence as an established mechanism has helped to train and develop university personnel with an institutional mindset for negotiating with its superiors. In China's

politically charged context, that is always a challenge. According to historical institutionalism scholars, the introduction of new ideas is an important factor in shaping people's behaviors; together, they contribute to the continuation or alteration of institutional logics and arrangements. PE has allowed the universities to develop their institutional potential by learning how to interact and to negotiate more proactively with the government to pursue their interests and push their own agendas in a bottom-up fashion. The universities have developed through their constant practice of PE (or observation of such practice). As a result, they have been able to develop an increasing awareness of their own capabilities and acquire in the process the increased experience they need to represent their respective cases more effectively to the state and to negotiate it more strategically in the consensus-building processes.

9.3.3 Policy experimentation's changing role in the reform process

The four policy experiments unfolded over various chronological junctures as China's officials demonstrated different types and functions of the PE approach as reflected in how each was used in the policy process. Since 'all organizations are embedded within an institutional environment that constitutes the underlying rationale for the organization's functioning' (Senge, 2013), the initiation, implementation and policy incorporation of a particular experiment is subject to a multiplicity of social and institutional variables and influences. Hence, this section situates each case within its respective political, social, economic and cultural contexts. By placing them in the context of the development of broader policy agendas over the decades, the section explores PE's changing shape and role in the HE reform process.

Especially at the beginning of the reform period commencing in 1978, the adoption of PE as a historically inherited policy mechanism for reform (see Heilmann, 2008b) fit in with China's rapidly evolving reality in every aspect of life. For such a

huge and vastly diversified country, it was necessary to use the laboratory, learning-by-doing approach to test and to ensure the feasibility and practicability of a vast array of new and innovative approaches. In many cases, the adoption of the PE approach and its creation of expanded strategy space derived often by default from ambiguous state messages and state-university negotiations reflected the weak institutional environment that existed at the beginning of the reform era. Coming out of the Cultural Revolution, the new China confronted a crumpled infrastructure and established institutions and regulations that become obsolete and lost their relevance. With an utter lack of models, historical precedents, and procedures relevant to creating a new higher education system, China's reforms had to proceed cautiously by 'crossing the river by feeling the stones'. In this rapidly evolving paradigm, most of the earliest experimental higher education reforms followed a bottom-up model with the universities acting with experiment point status and enjoying an expanded strategy space.

Case I and Case II must be understood in this context. They took place in this earlier period when the new China was just embarking on its gradual development. These early, university initiated experiments made substantial use of the PE approach to generate urgently needed innovative policy solutions, many of which were later recognised by the government and integrated into the national policymaking process for higher education. The authorities made sure the productive dimension of these early efforts were highly visible to the public as a means of countering the widespread resistance to change and instilling a more innovative mindset in the broader society.

During this period, the national leaders were strongly urging the people to get behind the nationwide reform initiative. The necessity and urgency for reform was clearly reflected in the state's dominant rhetoric. Now, China's government still makes reform a key theme and public message, but nowadays it takes a more cautious attitude

and approach. In those early days, the government's official refrain was, 'We allow mistakes in reforms, but we do not allow no-reform.' This message illuminates the sense of urgency that existed at the time (the period just after the Cultural Revolution had ended in the late 1970s and beginning of the 1980s). In hindsight, many people are still critical of those radical early reforms and thought they were perhaps too extreme. Nevertheless, the national leaders' attitudes and public rhetoric, as A6 even now recalled, 'had tremendous influence on our mindsets and behaviors.' He was then President of Wantong University and titular leader of their reform efforts. The acute sense of necessity and urgency that existed at the time explains in part why the university leaders often responded to the nationwide crisis by taking the initiative and becoming the spearheads of the reform process.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the rapid changes in China's higher education even accelerated, particularly with the publication and promotion of the *Decision on the Reforms of China's Educational System* published in 1985 and the *Outline of China's Education Reform and Development* published in 1993. Starting with his iconic Southern Tour (*nan xun*) in 1992, the then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping officially launched China's gradual transition to a 'socialist market economy'. This thrust extended even further the revolutionary changes Deng had begun in 1978. It initiated a period of rapid technological development, economic growth, and social change which still unfolding as we speak. From that definitive moment in 1992, policy development in almost every sector revolved around one paramount theme: how to better adapt to and therefore develop a market economy in China.

In this context, Case III takes on a more vibrant meaning. As discussed in Chapter 7, a primary driver of Tanhua's distance education project was the technological development which drove its initiation and implementation. The ongoing

development of the socialist market economy also allowed the market to expand and to provide an added impetus for universities to participate in distance education. A severe labor market shortage of skilled workers and the limited availability of quality education all made the potential market for distance education large enough to allow for its development on a self-sustainable operational basis. The government's official advocacy of education equality, informatisation and lifelong learning also diverted the national discourse to encourage higher education in all its possible forms. In this sense, the development of modern distance education aligned well with the public rhetoric of the nation's leaders and the country's economic needs. Concomitantly, for those very reasons, the government used the process to regulate the development of distance education in a timely fashion to address emerging problems.

As the institutional arrangement increasingly matured and the 'rule of law' was officially included in the Constitution in 1999 (though its development was far from perfect, for example, see Birney (2014) who argues that China is a nation-state that follows a 'rule of mandate' where priorities rather than laws or leaders govern), there were fewer possibilities for the university to engage in policy experiments with little intervention and expanded strategy space. So after the early rapid reforms, the new or remaining problems in higher education that existed around the turn of the century posed more difficult and complicated challenges and required to be addressed more with a coordinated top-down approach. Hence, the threshold for reforms became higher, and the government became more cautious about authorising experimental efforts and devolving the expanded accompanying power which went with their authorisation. In this new and evolving atmosphere, the state-university relationship became more stable, but their interactions became less flexible and dynamic while the power boundaries became less malleable.

Concomittantly, it is arguably true that university leaders in the 1980s and 1990s were more proactive and entrepreneurial. Apparently, their ideas, aspirations and strategies were facilitated and shaped by the pervasive institutional situation at the time, as discussed earlier. In the most recent two decades, the overall situation has stabilised. And, it seems, there are fewer innovative university leaders and a 'dramatic decline in intellectual elitism', possibly due to China's increased official control over certain aspects of HE (Tenzin, 2017, p. 9). Now, university leaders are more tightly tied to the national administrative ranks and their aspirations and preferences are shaped by the existing institutional frameworks that were put in place in the 1980s and 1990s, making them less likely to engage in bottom-up entrepreneurial reforms.

Increasing HE internationalisation and globalisation also brings various frameworks of reference to China, pushing the government and the university towards certain policy objectives and instruments imitiated from 'the best practice'. It, to a degree, decreases the necessity to use PE in mapping directions, generating policy solutions, or 'testing the water'.

In this context, we might now better understand why Case IV, which occurred after 2000, assumed more of a symbolic significance in the policy process. The state initiated the project to formulate bylaws through 'experiment' and 'staged expansion'. The authorities were careful to situate this initiative in the maturing institutional environment and against the newly unveiled 'rule of law' agenda. So carefully framed and staged, the project served as an exemplary prescriptive model for future institutional behavior and reflected the gradually established boundaries in HE governance.

In sum, given the nature of policymaking and (intentionally) ambiguous boundaries of policy experimentation, it is impossible to extrapolate the absolute changes which were brought or to trace a clear roadmap of the changing role of PE in in

China's HE policymaking process. Nevertheless, the study's analysis does demonstrate the different uses for policy experiments in China: sometimes it can act as a more productive force for generating and testing possible innovative policy options that maybe incorporated into national policy-making; at other times, it can assume a more symbolic use by allowing the government to acquire or consolidate policy-making legitimacy for its reforms. In a sense, policy processes are reconstituted in ways that are mediated by the different types and uses of policy experimentation towards either reform efficacy or institutional conformity.

If those policy experiments are judged by the central government as conducive to its policy agenda or objectives, the successful experience can be expanded and replicated with policy refinements through a process of 'proceeding from point to surface' (*you dian ji mian*). This policy diffusion can usually be achieved through policy documents ('documentary politics'), conferences ('open method of coordination'), or high-level leaders' speeches. For example, in Case I, the government did not require any other universities to follow Suwen's management reforms. But Deng's high regard for the reforms Suwen achieved created a 'policy bandwagon' effect with many universities conducting study visits to Suwen and imitating its strategies.

Then, across all types of policy experiments, what factors determine the degree of influence of a particular experiment on the subsequent policy and reforms it creates?

The first factor has to do with the experiment itself – the operational factors consisting of credibility, timeliness, communicability and visibility, generalisability and relevance (Greenberg & Mandell, 1991). It has to be a successful experiment with a demonstrated beneficial effect. These accrued effects generally need to be confirmed and validated as other universities re-test and gather more evidence for their viability. This follow-up testing has either been voluntarily initiated by other universities or

initiated by state mandate (A23). It means that an experiment's replicability or generalisability and applicability to the national situation at the time is important. An experimental attempt might prove successful in one or a few institutions, but it might not be generalisable at a given time or under certain circumstances to the whole nation considering China's scale and complexity.

The second set of determinants has to do with the policy environment, which often in turn has to do with both the political utility and the institutional environment at the time. As stressed repeatedly in this study, the central government has ultimate control regarding the justification, selection and expansion of policy experiments. In many cases, it is most important for policy entrepreneurs to form strong advocacy coalitions to acquire the status and leverage to persuade other interest groups to join or support them and to facilitate getting the project on the policy agenda. This factor is most important in ultimately determining the scale of its influence.

It is also important to note that though with powerful policy actors in place and ideas for changes, institutional environments are still a powerful force in the process. For example, the Tongye and Shirui university graduate employment assignment system experiment could not have been immediately replicated on a national scale since this issue was closely linked to the university admission system, the higher education fee system, and the development of the market economy and labor market. Take Wantong University in Case I as another example. Many of its attempts, such as its adoption of a credit system, did not leave much of a trace on HE development in China. It did not, however, undermine the importance of a particular strategy in a specific institution, but rather it reflected the fact that the appropriate conditions were not in place to allow such a strategy to proceed on a larger scale. So whether an experiment has the potential to project a larger influence often depends at a given time on the

institutional environment. Following up on this line of narrative, the function of PE and PE-enabled reform need to be situated within a specific institutional setting. In another word, policy experiment can only be initiated and succeed when particular social conditions and behaviors are in place. Usually those conditions do not spontaneously emerge; they have to be constructed and developed by elite actors and institutions. Hence, there is a constitutive relationship between an individual's ideas and ideology, the institutional arrangements and the overall context (cultural, political, social and economic).

9.3.4 Formation of the policy experimentation approach and its continued use

If we accept the previous argument—i.e. that using the PE approach as a way to conduct power negotiations is a semi-institutionalised way for achieving higher education reforms in China—I would further argue that it has also become the modus operandi with Chinese characteristics for achieving those reforms. 'Chinese characteristics' (*zhong guo te se*) is a euphemistic tag which is frequently used in the state discourse to highlight the indigenousness of China's practice (for example, 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'). This section explores why this is the case by discussing the underlying rationale behind the adoption and continued use of PE.

In the literature review, I discussed three possible reasons for the emergence of PE in China: i.e., the central-local government relationship (political centralisation and economic decentralisation); competition among factions; and the 'reform without theory' mentality. Heilmann (2008b) also provides a detailed account regarding the origins and development of the PE approach. He traces its roots to China's revolutionary war period between the 1920s and 1940s. The scholarly debate, however, largely confines these roots to consideration of economic and social reforms, whereas the investigation of PE's roots in education remains largely neglected.

Building on the previous scholarship, I argue that the adoption of the PE approach in the education sector can be attributed to two factors. The first has to do with the particularities embedded in China's situation in general and in education in particular. The second derives from the pragmatic mindset embedded in Chinese culture. These traditional factors in turn are firmly entrenched in the national discourse on education and have been further promoted and advocated by the state's rhetoric.

The first factor that requires careful consideration with respect to China's reforms is the country's enormous geographical scale and population–i.e. the regions and institutions involved and the people concerned. In China, a majority of the higher education institutions are public institutions funded and administered by governments. Within this public system, there are different universities with access to variable levels of resources and at variable levels of development. It is not a level playing field. And there are pronounced regional differences which inevitably influence the variability of institutional vision in different localities and the institutions' respective development priorities. This level of complexity also means that a single government entity such as the Ministry of Education (or each provincial/municipal government) cannot effectively attend to every detail in the operation and development of all the universities in its jurisdiction. That gap naturally leads to the opening of a certain strategy space in which a university can nurture room to maneuver.

This is particularly true given the massive expansion of higher education from 1999. This growth in China's HE system inevitably brought changes in the policy environment in which universities operated in. In a sense, this use of experimentation and negotiation was a plausible approach for a few elite universities because they possessed irreplaceable resources in a given institutional setting, but it was much harder to do for a growing number of not-so-elite universities who had neither the capacity nor

the resources to carry it out.

In addition, the *tiao-kuai* governance structure (as discussed above) means that a university most often is subject to both functional management and territorial management. The *tiao-kuai* integration constitutes a fragmented administrative system in China. It also sometimes (unintentionally) gives the university a certain space for its own free exploration.

This phenomenon was particularly powerful at the beginning of modern China's development when people were sometimes still clueless regarding the means or even ends of the proposed reform schemes. Hence, the central government had to allow many local education institutions a loose rein to experiment in order to map and test appropriate strategies. Take as an example Suwen University in Case I. With the MoE and local government's acquiescence, Suwen adopted a differentiated pay and bonus system to provide work incentives for its faculty who were participating in the management reform experiment in the hope of discovering and testing new ways to improve efficiency. This approach worked (see the case study for a discussion).

For the university, the administratively heavy political configuration in China means that the government has the ultimate authority for the development of China's universities. The one-party system also endows the central authorities with the capability to initiate experimental changes, steer reforms or justify institutional initiatives in a relatively short time (this is in contrast to, for example, the need for prolonged debate to authorise reforms in a two-party system). Though it sounds counter-intuitive, it also means that the frameworks and boundaries set by it and the restrictions attached to it might only have an opportunity to change through repeated institutional practices under the relatively safe and appealing rubric of 'experiment'. Case II, the state sponsored university graduate employment assignment experiment, is

a typical example.

Using an experimental approach to gather evidence, lower reform costs and acquire legitimacy for institutional change is particularly useful when one considers the use and function of China's public universities. 'Education is always a sensitive area – a barometer of political movements', was A6's summary based on his experience both as a state official and a university policy and reform entrepreneur. Hu Jintao, China's then president, stated four essential functions of China's universities with respect to society: 'Talent Cultivation, Scientific Research, Society Service and Cultural Inheritance and Innovation' (Hu, 2011). Hu's formula clearly demonstrates the central role of higher education in China's development and government's political legitimacy. The government prefers to keep HEIs, especially elite universities, at arms-length while gradually granting them incremental autonomy and relying on their expertise in training a productive labor force and driving economic development.

Universities as higher education institutions, on the other hand, have such unique organisational characteristics as structural inertia and reform-resistance (discussed in detail in Chapter 4). These factors perhaps explain why education reform has to start on a small scale and on an experimental, trial and error basis. There seems to be a clear need for an effective evidence-building process that could lead naturally to further reforms acceptable for all the parties involved. Those elite universities appointed as experiment points served as model demonstrations for other universities to imitate – this mechanism was particularly useful in the context of getting universities to become increasingly homogenous. Hence, the inception of this process opens the door to the greatly expanded possibilities of state-university power negotiations.

The malleable boundary of strategy space and the constant bargaining and compromising between the state and the university reflect the essence of the Chinese

practice as policy experimentation. It is nested in the traditional pragmatic mindscape and acceptance of uncertainty (Hofstede, 1980) of the Chinese people. The 'Beijing Consensus', coined by Ramo (2004), refers to a Chinese development model which is different from the neoliberal 'Washington Consensus' model. The 'Beijing Consensus' model foregrounds the deliberate use of innovation and experimentation in China's development—a characteristic of what Hasmath (2014) refers to as 'a philosophical movement towards an ultra-pragmatic view' (p.5). This 'reform without theory', pragmatism-driven mentality might explain the origin and subsequent constant use of PE, as well as people's reception and appreciation towards such an approach in reform-related efforts. The university actors, with the idea of 'semi-independence' (Pan, 2009) and 'obedient autonomy' (Evasdottir, 2004), in particular, constantly seek to realise their own articulated interests on a pragamtic basis.

This pragmatic mentality, furthermore, has been constantly advocated and reinforced by the state's public rhetoric and discourse. As shown in the descriptive mapping and case studies, the PE related terms are constantly used and promoted in governmental reports and the national media. It can also be seen reflected in the national leadership's avowed ideological orientation. For example, then paramount leader Mao Zedong, influenced by John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy, voiced the motto in 1958 'everything through experimentation' (*yi qie jing guo shi yan*) (Heilmann, 2008b). Chen Yun and Deng Xiaoping's idea of 'crossing the river by feeling the stones' is also a typical expression of this brand of typically Chinese self-sufficient pragmatism. It is a principle derived from the New China's early reality: it conveys the great necessity for reforms in an environment where there were few precedents for how to proceed, a weak institutional environment, and a looming Chinese society of enormous scale. The pragmatist mindset embodied in these ideological guidelines reflects how both the

government and higher education institutions adopted a result-oriented and objective-oriented mode with both parties mutually agreeing to push for major institutional change through policy experimentation.

The essence of this typically Chinese pragmatism was captured best by Deng Xiaoping's famous proverb, 'White or black, it is a good cat as long as it catches mice' (Deng, 1994). For example, in Case II, the state allowed the two experiment points much strategy space to explore strategies for changing the university graduate employment system. As long as they could design effective strategies to solve the problems and issues they encountered, the state would allow it. Similarly, in Case I, the institutional initiative was backed by the state's leaders to explore and test possible strategies for change even though those strategies might go against the then dominant paradigm (such as *Da Guo Fan* and *Tie Fan Wan*). In 1992, the experimental approach was incorporated into the Constitution of Communist Party of China and has been retained since then. It called upon all Party members to 'explore new ways, boldly experiment…' (Communist Party of China, 2012).

Over time, the pragmatic principles embodied in those catchy sayings, through repeated use, established themselves as guideposts for China's reforms and the principles for policy actors to follow in initiating institutional changes.

The four cases discussed in this thesis describe four policy experiments that assume variable shapes and functions – the latest one demonstrates more of a symbolic dimension rather than substantial function in reform-related policymaking. In that case, when referring to Case IV, B3 asked with genuine concern: 'Why did I have to take an experimentalist approach if I already knew the right way to do certain things?' The shared agreement for HEIs to establish bylaws removed the necessity to use an experimental approach to map directions or gather evidence to build a consensus. For

the MoE, 'Top-level design was much more important when we were aware of what to do' (B3). Why then did the state actors and university actors continue to resort to the PE approach when there was no necessity to do so?

From a historical institutionalism perspective, the policy choices which states and institutions made in the past continue to exert a lasting and largely determinant influence over the decisions which have been made since (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). So this path dependency refers to an organisation's tendency toward inertia to persist after its initial policy choices are made. The historical use of the PE approach since the revolutionary period might explain why various parties to a certain experiment resorted to the PE approach as a change mechanism and how that persistence was, in turn, reinforced through positive feedback from the results of previous policy choices (Pierson, 2000). In other words, PE's demonstrated utility further shaped people's ideas and contributed to the emergence and maintenance of a consensus regarding the use of PE in enabling reforms, especially under restricted and uncertain conditions. China's historically situated structure, particularly the party-state's political structure, may help to explain why this indigenous and distinctive PE reform methodology was retained and continues to be used in China, especially for higher education.

9.4 Summary

This thesis has sought an answer to a simple question: how do we understand and explain institutional change in China's higher education? In answering that question, this study has offered a new perspective for understanding HE governance and reform - elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies. This PE approach allows flexibility for state-university power negotiations, the creation of an expanded strategy space for local discretionary use, and the government's selective control within a deliberately ambiguous policy environment. Overtime, PE has been established as a

widely used, semi-institutionalised approach to China's policymaking and reform process in the higher education sector.

This study used four in-depth case studies with follow-on cross-case comparisons to trace the changing manners and functions of PE in China's HE reforms. The deliberate application of a combination of middle-range theories has also enabled the study to examine the complicated realities in which China's PE tend to be embedded and how the process itself builds linkages between micro-level individual behavior and interpretation and the broader social, economic, political and cultural contexts, which cannot be fully account for by any existing western paradigms alone.

This study has endeavored to make a contribution to the growing body of literature which seeks to understand the rationale and logics of China's policymaking and reform efforts, particularly in the most recent decades (see Heilmann, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Liu, 2010; Zhou, 2011; Heilmann & Perry, 2011; Heilmann et al., 2013; Ning, 2014; Schoon, 2014). In spite of the growing body of literature, however, education remains a largely neglected area among the scholarly debates on China's experimental and adaptive governance and policymaking (Heilmann & Perry, 2011) with the majority cases discussed fall into the economic and political areas (Teets, 2015). Therefore, this study tried to go beyond the existing scholarship by offering an empirically based account of four policy experiments in China's higher education sector which enables a better understanding of China's experimental governance in education.

Furthermore, while the existing scholarship focuses mainly on experiments sponsored by the central government either implicitly or explicitly (as discussed in Chapter 2), this study was able to demonstrate that there has also been an interest in and tradition of bottom-up experiments in HE which have been successfully conducted, often in ambiguous situations or even confronted by hostile central government

opposition. Instead of always waiting for the government's 'tacit approval' (Heilmann et al., 2013), occasionally elite universities have been able to demonstrate their self-motivated will and power to negotiate with the state to advance higher education development. It is noteworthy, still, that the state plays a decisive role in this process, particularly as reflected in its authority for recognising, legitimatising, expanding and integrating locally-driven experiments.

More importantly, while most of the existing scholarly work focuses primarily on situating individual policy experiments more toward the fringes of the border policy spectrum, this study has placed particular attention on the initiation and implementation process of experiments. Through four strategically chosen case studies and cross-case comparisons, this study carefully unfolded the nature of the state-university dynamic interactions embedded in the PE approach.

These allowed the study to develop, building on concepts previously developed by Heilmann and others, the ides of elite-enabled experimentation withing existing hiearchies to capture the essence of the process of institutional change in China's HE sector. It has highlighted the significance of elite policy actors, university leaders and state actors in this power negotiation process in creating a strategy space in which the university can maneuver and build a lasting consensus for change. The often ambiguous and malleable boundaries of PE can best be understood as the result of a mutually agreed upon understanding of China's unique realities: the central authority in China has the authority and power to initiate experimental changes, steer reforms and justify institutional initiatives in a relatively short time without losing hierarchical control. The frameworks and boundaries set by the existing institutional arrangements might only have the opportunity to change under the relatively safe and appealing rubric of 'experiment'. Meanwhile, the government always reserves the right to identify

expanded applications for those locally generated innovations as part of a prolonged learning process in a volatile policy environment. Again, this practice is particularly noteworthy when much of the existing scholarship perceives Chinese universities as operating in a highly charged and contentious political environment with little autonomy.

Last, this study pointed out that PE-enabled reforms involve a set of interdependent factors: individual ideas and behaviours (a collective group of powerful actors' beliefs, perceptions and actions), institutional arrangements (policy experimentation and negotiated strategy space) and contexts (broader economic, social, political and cultural changes at corresponding periods). Due to a careful consideration of these factors, this study differentiated four types of policy experiments according to their manner of initiation, actors' involvement, and policy pathways to achieve a more systematic understanding of PE. Those dimensions correspond to the three drivers of policy experiments identified in the study. By placing four experimental reforms in their respective historical contexts, this study further analysed these different dimensions of PE functions as productive, disciplinary and symbolic and demonstrated how they emerge and become reflected, singularly or collectively, in the reform process.

These ways of analysing and categorising based on a set of interdependent factors were deliberately linked together to more effectively capture the different dimensions of policy experiments. Consequently, this study offers a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of the experimental governance as developed and adapted in a heterogeneously nation-state under rapidly changing political, social, economic and structural circumstances.

Chapter 10. Concluding remarks

This study presented four in-depth case studies featuring various types of policy experiments which have occurred in China's higher education (HE) development to investigate how policy experimentation (PE) facilitates state-university power negotiations and institutional change. Building on the existing scholarship on China's PE practice, it has offered a distinctive perspective for understanding and explaining the power dynamics embedded in China's higher education reform process and more broadly the evolution of Chinese governance.

Building on the discussion of research findings, this chapter briefly discusses the implications the findings and further directions for research on Chinese higher education and policy experimentation. 10.1 discusses the Chinese university presidents' power boundaries and institutional capacity to acquire and maintain their autonomy in a hierarchical party-state. 10.2 suggests policy implications for HE policymakers in both China and other political economies. China's PE practice is instructive for institutions and national systems to allow, recognise and utilise locally generated, experimental strategies for higher education development. To conclude, this chapter conjectures possible scenarios for PE in the future and their possible implications for China's governance in the future.

10.1 Chinese universities: Institutional autonomy and presidents' power

In the approach featuring elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies to China's higher education reforms, the leaders of elite universities play an important role. In many cases, their ideas and preferences encourage them to take on the role of policy entrepreneurs, acting as power agents or catalysts for institutional change. Sometimes, they proactively propose new ideas and initiatives; other times, they form advocacy coalitions to implement their strategies and get them on the policy agenda.

They also play a strategic role in the power negotiations with the administrative authorities and other stakeholders to vocalise, gain visibility, and realise their ideas in China's politically charged environment.

Such importance naturally leads to a question: In the PE process, to what degree do the leaders of China's elite universities have the capacity to negotiate with the state and influence the operation of their institutions of higher learning? Here 'university leaders' refers not only presidents but to a collective group of people holding decision-making power in a university, primarily presidents and vice presidents, but also party secretaries and vice party secretaries.

On the one hand, the *Higher Education Law* (1988) clearly states that, 'Presidents and vice-presidents of higher education institutions shall be appointed and removed according to the relevant regulations of the state' (Article 40). Presidents and party secretaries of the 31 key national universities ('vice-ministerial level' universities) are even appointed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Organization Department of the CPC. In China, the position of a leader in a public university is tied to the state's administrative ranking system. For example, for the 31 key national universities, the president's administrative rank is equal to the sub-provincial/ministerial level. Through this organisational mechanism, the state's bureaucracies have the ultimate decision-making power over China's public universities.

Such an institutional arrangement, furthermore, indicates that the universities' leaders need to consider seriously their political careers when it comes to HE reforms. Often, if they are cautious and risk averse, they might favor stability over change. Because China's public universities are subject to the government's rules and regulations, the administrative authorities, in turn, are held responsible and accountable for university behavior in their jurisdictions. Even the entrepreneurial and pro-reform

leader Deng Xiaoping once proposed the principle of 'ensuring stability as the overriding need and principle' (News of the Communist Party of China, n.d.).

However, given China's scale, the universities at different levels have different objectives and challenges – it often requires a university leaders' close observations and situated interpretations and wisdom rather than a top-down unified framework designed by the government to address them effectively.

Therefore, though China is still a highly centralised nation-state, what and how to do things within a university is often up to its leaders who presumably would have the insider knowledge and expertise, as C4 noted. This is why university leaders are often given broad discretionary powers over their own internal matters. In fact, unlike the stereotypes prevalent in the scholarship, China's university leaders might enjoy an unparalleled degree of freedom and decision-making power within their institutions compared to their counterparts around the world, though it may sound counterintuitive to many observers' (A19). As further explained by A22, in many Western countries, by comparison, university reforms are often subject to such institutional arrangements as university boards of trustees and various interest groups. But China's current arrangement indicates that the power is highly consolidated at the university level in the president's hands with the departments subject to his decision-making power.

At the moment, it is difficult to quantify or delineate university leaders' power boundaries. This deliberate ambiguity, to a degree, is one with Chinese characteristics—it can mean trouble as well as space to maneuver. On the one hand, there is a lack of clear protocol stemming from the incomplete institutional environment and absence of a mature rule-of-law system. It gives university presidents who are innovative and bold (arguably) conducive conditions to experiment and creatively engage with the state for more favorable terms for reform.

As a result, collectively, university leaders are expected to project their ideas upon their universities and influence the course of their development—and usually they do. Such influence may last longer than the terms of appointment for certain other leaders since it contributes to the formation of a university's culture that can be passed on for generations. As A16 stated, 'To a degree, a university's culture is the president's culture. The president is pivotal – every president has his/her vision for the university's development.'

Indeed, a good leader is essential to a university – this is the case with universities worldwide, but particularly so in China. As discussed, the university's development is often influenced by the ability of its leader to make use of the space created by the relatively ambiguously regulated conditions in which he is expected to operate. As a result, some university presidents are able to lead their universities forward, others are not. As stated by a former education minister, recalled by A13, 'Whether a university can prosper largely depends on its president.' Therefore, differences among the central leadership, particularly their visions, initiatives and resources, may explain why, among China's elite universities, there are different paces of reform and levels of development.

Due to the university leaders' significant power in internal governance and the conservative inertia of higher education institutions, more often than not the government opts for an experimental approach to university reform and relies on each university's leaders to push for change. These university presidents are agents of power, acting as the spearheads and direct contacts for the universities' interactions with the state's bureaucracies in the reform negotiation and exploration process. In this sense, their ambiguous power boundaries have become an embedded element in the paradigm

featuring elite-enabled experimentation within existing political hierarchies in China's HE.

University actors and state actors, however, do not necessarily share the same interpretations regarding an existing situation at a given time. A10 recounted a telling example:

> In China, the government has established a state advisory committee for universities under the direct administration of the Ministry of Education. I was, at one time, a representative on behalf of the university sector. On many occassions we met with the state's representatives from whom we demanded more autonomy. They were always puzzled: we have already given you so much power, how come you still want more? I think the confusion arises from the different interpretations coming from different positions – administrative leaders vs. university practitioners respectively.

For some matters that the university deems justifiable, the state may see it as inappropriate. A typical example is admissions: some universities want to recruit more students for tuition fees or research output. The state, on the other hand, has to make account of the funding and other available resources and consider the overall layout for higher education nationwide. B2 gave an example: A coastal metropolis, at one point, sought to hold onto its autonomy in determining student admissions, partially because it wanted to recruit mainly from its own jurisdiction instead of from the central and western regions (generally less developed in terms of economy and higher education). But the MoE ruled against it on the grounds that this would jeopardise the country's overall HE development and increase inequality. On many occasions, there are different interest articulations that require negotiations and compromises – the negotiation process for autonomy in the Chinese context essentially has to do with power allocation and re-allocation. But such negotiations are still conducted within the framework of the hierarchical system – one clearly acknowledged by both university and state actors.

C6 described the state-university power dynamic as a kite-flying activity – 'The government wanted to give the university a certain degree of autonomy to fly higher,

but it didn't want the university to fly too high and lose control.' One possible reason was that MoE officials might have felt they were relinquishing too much power. Under certain scenarios, though there were clear state messages from politicians or even the central government calling for power devolution, the MoE only slowly implemented these changes, since 'giving the universities full autonomy means that there would have been nothing left for the MoE to do' (C6). This mentality derived directly from the legacy of the traditional central planning system in which the government always played a paramount role in decision-making. It might also be due to concerns regarding political stability, as discussed earlier. China's public universities have always been consciously ideologically laden institutions whose mission is to cultivate the next generation's cultural and political awareness. Hence, the government is particularly careful and circumspect about granting autonomy to higher education institutions.

In addition, more often than not, the government's devolution of power is built upon its wish for universities to acquire certain resources from the market. This rationale might further indicate that the market force will play an increasingly significant role in higher education system, in which the state and the academic oligarchy used to be the two dominant stakeholders. In particular, in 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China affirmed that the market shall play a 'decisive' role in resource allocation, a major change from the previously articulated 'basic' role (*Xinhua News*, 2013, Nov 15). This changing economic relation between the state and the market would inevitably change the triangular relationships among the state, the market and the university. As indicated in Clark's 'triangle of coordination' (1983), all three forces play important roles in the increasingly complex academic system; together, their dynamic power relations define the governance and authority distribution within HE system.

10.2 Policy implications: Institution building and international policy learning

To use experimental approaches to explore reform strategies, to test the likely impact of a particular measure, and/or to justify political decisions in higher education is not unique to China. In the literature review, this study provides a brief discussion of how similar practices have been carried out on the international stage (see Chapter 2). For example, the UK's *Closing the Gap: Test and Learn* program is a national experiment implemented in 740 trial site schools to find out the best way to close the attainment gap for underprivileged students (Churches, 2016).

China's PE, however, derives and distinguishes itself from its historical origin, unique political and cultural contexts, and (changing) institutional arrangements. This study regards it as a positive and systematic paradigm for structuring reforms. As this study argues, PE has been established as a sophisticated, semi-institutionalised approach in China's policymaking and reform process (that goes beyond the HE spectrum).

Institutional changes can be facilitated through 'social learning and experimentation' (Meyer & Rowan, 2006, p. 10) when confronted with internal and external shocks. The originality and utilisation of such an indigenous policy mechanism as PE, in a way, may indicate how the system is adaptive and even conducive to local initiatives. Its gradual institutionalisation over decades, in turn, has strengthened the state's capacity to accommodate policy experiments with embedded state-university power negotiations and related reforms.

If we go back to the definition of policymaking, presented at this study's very beginning, policymaking involves constant negotiation, modification and adjustment – 'a process of successive approximation to some desired objectives in which what is desired itself continues to change under reconsideration' (Lindblom, 1959, p. 88). The changing situation and negotiation is channelled through PE in which different power

agents are brought together while the policy objectives and instruments are adjusted constantly in the face of contingencies and uncertainties. Therefore, PE has become Chinese government's creative management of uncertainty in a highly volatile environment (Heilmann, 2009). Therefore, policymakers in China should continue to effectively engage with this mechanism to structure HE reform that relies on locally generated experience, continuous refinement and adaptation, especially in a context of China's distinctive political and cultural arrangement and rapidly developing economy and society.

China's PE approach may provide valuable implications for other countries in higher education sector. For one thing, it allows the creation of strategy space in which local and central powers interact and negotiate to solve possible conflicts and build consensuses for reforms. For another, the use of the experimental approach encourages individual organisations to proactively seek policy solutions that often are more contextualised to suit institutional needs. It also allows the central government to utilise locally generated innovative strategies for more effective changes. It can be particularly useful in enhancing institutional capacity and policy mindset in encouraging, accepting and utilising bottom-up initiatives as an integral element in tinkering with existing policy agendas. China's PE practices, therefore, can be instructive models for other countries, especially those 'saddled with a strong institutional status-quo bias and weak policy corrective mechanisms' (Heilmann & Perry, 2011, p. 24) for introducing higher education reforms in differentiated and changing environments.

Policy experimentation did not start in higher education, and is not limited to higher education. It is a governance option strategically chosen and adopted by China's leadership and gradually becomes a key force within Chinese politics. At the moment, however, there is a shift towards a stronger focus on 'top-level design' by the central

government to reform rather than a more flexible and exploratory policymaking (Heilmann, 2016). Such shift becomes particularly visible under the current leader Xi Jinping's regin, featuring 'central decisiveness…foundaed on autocratic policy pushes and leader-driven agendas that are transformed into comprehensive long-term programs within the core executive triangle' (Heilmann, 2017, p.77).

As indicated by previous discussion, it is possible that Chinese government may use PE as an approach to gradually expand a pre-conceived reform plan, in which case its capacity to generate innovative strategies applicable to local conditions is compromised. According to this narrative, a problem may emerge in the future as to what extent the use of PE actually increases reform efficiency. Sometimes one particular reform does not require an experimental approach. But it might be used habitually to introduce a reform in a prolonged manner or even used by certain interest groups to stall reform (Zeng, 2015). Local leaders might engage in 'face innovation' for career promotion (Teets, 2015), especially when there seems to be a systematic way to reward local leaders' policy experiments with faster promotion, particularly in economic area (Mei & Wang, 2017).

Further, in 2014, the Fourth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China specifically emphasised the importance to build a 'Socialist rule-of-law system with Chinese characteristics' (*Xinhua News,* 2014, Dec 28). The new commitment might further compromise the value of PE. However, the country still has a long way to go before building a fully functioning rule-of-law system. In the future, it is likely that China will maintain its pragmatic mindset and rule-of-document paradigm in conducting its various social reforms.

This study demonstrated the use of policy experimentation for involving state actors and university actors in the power negotiations and for bringing about

institutional changes and policy reforms. It constitutes an integral part of China's 40-year effort (since 1978) to develop a modern higher education system and a concurrent effort to achieve a balance between state power and institutional autonomy. However, the degree to which policy experimentation continues to function as productive solution-seeking and testing mechanism, and to what degree the university sector can play an active part in their own institutional changes, remains uncertain.

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Appendices

Appendix I Interview protocol

Table I An interview protocol

Phases	Items
Before the interview	- Identify potential interviewees, collect essential information and contact them for participation - Send them an information sheet for participation that contains all essential information relevant to this study - Arrange date and venue of interviews, preferable in a private or semi-private place - Design interview questions - Check directions for interviews' places - Prepare at least two recording devices, such as recorders and smartphones; check their batteries
During the interview	- Give interviewees a hard copy of information sheet, reassure confidentiality and ensure ethic of this study - Collect consent from interviewees - Reaffirm permission to record and prepare for (occasional) note taking - Attend to the wording of questions to guide the interviewees and remain a degree of flexibility - Active listening - Use main questions as a guideline; start with more basic and easier ones and moves to more difficult ones to allow a sequence within themes - Use open-ended questions - Use follow-up questions and probes. For example, what do you mean? Can you give me an example? Why? - Be able to 'improvise' on the spot - Ask for any resources that maybe helpful for this study - Ask for possibility to interview other relevant informants - Ask for possibility of follow-up interviews through either phone, email or in person
After the interview	- Write up a brief summary immediately after finishing interviews, including self-reflections - Send a letter of gratitude; arrange follow-up interviews/questions if necessary (one follow-up interview) - Reflect and revise interview questions, when necessary - Transcribe the interviews - Incorporate the interview data and the researcher's field notes/reflections into a case study database

Appendix II Informed Consent Documents

Figure II-a Participant Information Sheet

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shuangmiao.han@education.ox.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Participant Information Sheet

1. **Study title**

Policy experimentation and higher education reforms in China

2. **Background and aims of the study**

The study aims to explore the role of policy experimentation (*zheng ce shi yan*) played within state-university power negotiations and higher education reforms in China. It aims to unfold the interaction between university actors and state actors in the initiation, implementation and incorporation process of policy experimentation taking place in China's higher education reforms. It plans to select four case studies with embedded sub-case.

The principal researcher of the proposed study is Shuangmiao Han, who is a DPhil (doctoral) student in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford and a recipient of scholarship from the China's Scholarship Council. Dr. Hubert Ertl and Dr. David Mills, who are both associate professors in the Oxford's Department of Education, are supervising this project. This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). Ms. Han can be contacted through:

Email: shuangmiao.han@education.ox.ac.uk

Tel: +44(0) 7754 309917

Address: Department of Education, University of Oxford, Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY, UK

3. **Why have I been invited to take part?**

The project aims to interview people that have an extensive knowledge and/or direct involvement in the selected policy experiment practices in China's higher education reforms.

- You have been invited to participate in the study because you have been involved/are involving in the policy experiment project in selected China's higher education reforms either as a) a state/region-level official; or b) a leader, faculty or relevant administrative staff in selected case universities.

- You have been invited to participate in the study because you are an expert/have written/have been working on issues related to China's higher education reforms and/or policy experiment in China.

4. **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You may ask the researcher any related questions or information to decide whether or not to participate. However, we believe that you have something important to contribute to this study and to future research in China's higher education reform and policy experiment. Your contribution would form an essential part in the research and be

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deeply appreciated. Please note, however, that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time and will not be asked to give any reasons if you do choose to withdraw.

5. What will happen in the study?

If you agree to take part in this study we will arrange an interview with you. The time, location and forms (in-person, skype or phone) can be arranged at your convenience. A Participate Information Sheet containing essential information will be sent to you beforehand, via either email or post at your preference, for you to read and raise any questions. During the interview, we will ask your permission to audio record the interview and sign a consent form. The interview will be conducted by Shuangmiao Han and will likely last between 60 to 90 minutes. You will be able to take breaks throughout the interview and can request to be interviewed on multiple occasions for shorter periods of time should this be more suitable for you. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview, though participation in this is optional.

6. Are there any potential risks in taking part?

The aim of the study is to deepen the understanding of the policy experiment approach in China's reform arena in general and in higher education in particular. It would be a great opportunity for you to reflect your participation and experiences in the process. Your participation, as part of the study, will benefit those who are interested in understanding China's policy experiment strategy and higher education reforms.

We hope that the experience of taking part in this study will be enjoyable for you. However, we want to assure you that you will at no point be obliged to talk about any topic that you are not willing to. Every effort will be made to preserve confidentiality but as this cannot be fully guaranteed by the nature of this research it is possible that you may be able to be identified in the final report. Other than this, there are no known risks to taking part.

7. What happens to the research data provided?

The interviews will be transcribed, translated (if conducted in Chinese) and stored digitally, managed by the researcher Shuangmiao Han for the duration of the project. Your personal data will be treated in total confidence, kept securely in a password-controlled laptop. Only the researcher will have access to the interviews and personal information. Publications which come out of this project may use direct quotations from your interview with your consent. In all works produced using your interview, your name and other personal information will be anonymised and remain confidential.

8. Will the research be published?

The University of Oxford is committed to the dissemination of its research for the benefit of society and the economy and, in support of this commitment, has established an online archive of research materials. This archive includes digital copies of student theses successfully submitted as part of a University of Oxford postgraduate degree programme. Holding the archive online gives easy access for researchers to the full text of freely available theses, thereby increasing the likely impact and use of that research.

If you agree to participate in the project, the research will be written up as a doctoral thesis.

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All participants are able to request a summary of the research findings if they wish to by contacting the researcher Shuangmiao Han. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University of Oxford, to facilitate its use in future research. The digital online copy of the thesis will be deposited with the Oxford University Research Archive (ORA) and will be published with open access, meaning that it will be available to all Internet users. Some results maybe published in academic journals concerning educational policy.

9. Who has reviewed this project?

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

The project has also been reviewed by Shuangmiao Han's supervisors, Dr. Hubert Ertl and Dr. David Mill. They will supervise her in the entire process of her doctoral study. All participants are able to request a summary of the research findings if they wish to by contacting the researcher Shuangmiao Han. The result, as indicated above, will be written up a thesis that will be deposited both in print and online in the University of Oxford, to facilitate its use in future research.

10. Who do I contact if I have a concern about the study or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this project, please speak to the relevant researcher [+44(0) 7754 309917] or their supervisors [+44(0) 1865 274044; +44(0) 1865 274053] who will do his/her best to answer your query. The researcher should acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how he/she intends to deal with it. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford (using the contact details below) who will seek to resolve the matter in a reasonably expeditious manner:

Chair, **Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee**; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

Figure II-b Consent form

University of Oxford
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UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Consent Form

STUDY TITLE: Policy experimentation and higher education reforms in China

RESEARCHER: Shuangmiao Han, doctoral student in Department of Education at the University of Oxford

Declaration of Consent:

- I have read the study information sheet and had the opportunity to ask questions and received satisfactory answers to questions
- I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw myself or my data at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences
- I understand that only the researcher will have access to the interviews and personal information
- I understand that my personal data will be treated in total confidence, kept securely in a password-controlled laptop; and what will happen to the data at the end of the project
- I understand the research will be written up as a doctoral thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University of Oxford, to facilitate its use in future research
- I understand that the researcher may use direct quote from me
- I understand how to raise concerns or make a complaint
- I confirm that I have read the associated information sheet and understand the intent and purpose of this research

☐ I agree to voluntarily take part in the study
☐ I consent to being audio recorded
☐ I would like to receive a copy of the summary of the research

Name of Participant: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of researcher: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix III Semi-structured interviews: Questions

Figure III-a Interview questions for university stakeholders

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Interview Questions (Institution)

STUDY TITLE: Policy experimentation and higher education reforms in China

RESEARCHER: Shuangmiao Han, doctoral student in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford

1. Could you start by telling me this specific reform experiment you involved in? What was your role in the process?
2. What were the specific innovative measures and how did they come into being?
3. How a particular reform measure was implemented at your institution?
4. What was the state's reception?
5. For the case you mentioned, how did the university respond to the state's attitudes and behaviors?
6. At the time, how much flexibility the institution had in this particular instance?
7. What were the important factors influencing the process?
8. To what degree you think the experiment was successful? What were the proofs?
9. To what degree you think the experiment influenced subsequent reforms and policymaking?
10. In your perspective, what factors led to such results?
11. In this particular instance, what role did policy experimentation play in the state-university interaction and reform process?
12. Why do you think the reform was initiated and proceeded in an experimental fashion?

Figure III-b Interview questions for state stakeholders

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Interview Questions (State)

STUDY TITLE: Policy experimentation and higher education reforms in China

RESEARCHER: Shuangmiao Han, doctoral student in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford

1. Could you start by telling me the higher education reform experiment you involved in? What was your role in the process?
2. In your opinion, what was the role of the state in the particular case you mentioned?
3. What strategies the state took in the process?
4. What was the university's reception?
5. How was the interaction with the university? What factor influenced the process?
6. How large, do you think, was the reform space in the experiment you cited?
7. To what degree the particular experiment influenced subsequent reform and policymaking process?
8. Did the state's attitudes and strategies change when the experiment was expanded on a larger scale? What factors influenced the state's decision?
9. In your opinion, what was the role of policy experimentation in China's higher education reform?
10. Why do you think the reform was initiated and proceeded in an experimental fashion in the particular instance and in general?

Figure III-a Interview questions for academics

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Interview Questions (Academics)

STUDY TITLE: Policy experimentation and higher education reforms in China

RESEARCHER: Shuangmiao Han, doctoral student in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford

1. Could you start by telling me your knowledge of the experimental reform?
2. To what degree have you observed the initiation, implementation and interaction between the university involved and the state in this particular case?
3. What's your opinion, as an educationist, on the procedure and outcome of the experimental reform?
4. In your opinion, what is the role of the experimental reform in the subsequent higher education reform and policymaking process?
5. To what degree the university is able to negotiate with the state in the reform process in China?
6. In your opinion, what role does policy experimentation play in the state-university interaction and reform process?
7. What are the possible explanation of adopting an experimental approach?
8. What's your opinion on China's state-university relationship?

Appendix IV Information about interviewees

Table II Interviewees and their positions*

Code	Category	Position and involvement	(Main) Case relevant	Note
A1	Institution	Decision maker of Suwen University; participated in the Management Reform project.	Period I	
A2	Institution	Decision maker of Suwen University; participated in the Management Reform project; also is an expert in the history of Suwen University	Period I	
A3	Institution	Decision-maker of Suwen University; participated in the Management Reform project	Period I	
A4	Institution	Decision-maker of Suwen University; directed the Management Reform project	Period I	
A5	Institution	Decision-maker of Suwen University; participated in the Management Reform project.	Period I	
A6	Institution	Decision-maker of Wantong University; directed the Wantong University's reform	Period I	
A7	Institution	Decision-maker of Shirui University; participated in the University Graduate Employmente Assignment project	Period II	
A8	Institution	Decision-maker of Shirui University; participated in the University Graduate Employmente Assignment project; is also a member of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference	Period II	
A9	Institution	Decision-maker of Shirui University; directed the University Graduate Employmente Assignment project.	Period II	
A10	Institution	Decision-maker of Tongye University; directed the University Graduate Employmente Assignment project	Period II	Interviewed twice
A11	Institution	Decision-maker of Tongye University; participated in the University Graduate Employmente Assignment project	Period II	
A12	Institution	Decision-maker of Tanhua University; directed the Modern Distance Education project	Period III	Required review of text used
A13	Institution	Academic in technical/engineering disciplines in Tanhua University (the main person in charge of technical matters in the Modern Distance Education project)	Period III	
A14	Institution	The current leadership of the Online Education/Continuing Education Department of Tanhua University; was involved in the Modern Distance Education project	Period III	

Code	Category	Position and involvement	(Main) Case relevant	Note
A15	Institution	The current leadership of the Online Education/Continuing Education Department of Tanhua University; was not involved in the Modern Distance Education project's decision-making	Period III	
A16	Institution	The current leadership of the Online Education/Continuing Education Department of Shannan University; was involved in the Modern Distance Education project	Period III	Not recorded
A17	Institution	Directed the University Bylaws project in Tiankui University	Period IV	
A18	Institution	Participated in the University Bylaws project in Tiankui University and has extensive knowledge of topics investigated in this study	Period IV	
A19	Institution	Participated in the University Bylaws project in Tiankui University and has extensive knowledge of topics investigated in this study	Period IV	
A20	Institution	Participated in the University Bylaws project in Tiankui University	Period IV	
A21	Institution	Current leadership of Shuisu University; directed its University Bylaws project	Period IV	Not recorded
A22	Institution	Major participant of the University Bylaws project in Shuisu University	Period IV	
A23	Institution	Major participant of the University Bylaws project in Shuisu University	Period IV	
B1	State	Senior official in the Ministry of Education in the 1990s and has extensive knowledge of the topics investigated in this study	Period III/All periods	
B2	State	Senior official in the Ministry of Education in the 1990s and has extensive knowledge of the topics investigated in this study	Period III/All periods	
B3	State	Senior official in the Ministry of Education in the 2010s and has extensive knowledge of the topics investigated in this study	Period IV	Required review of text used
B4	State	Civil servant in the Ministry of Education (current)	Period IV	Off-record
B5	State	Civil servant in the Ministry of Education in the (current)	Period IV	Off-record
B6	State/Academics	Works for the Ministry of Education affiliated research centre and therefore constantly participates in policymaking process; also interviewed as an academic to comment on other experiments	Period IV/all periods	Not recorded
B7	State/Academics	Used to work for the Ministry of Education for two decades and is currently the director of an institution affiliated with the Ministry of Education; also interviewed as an academic to	Period IV/all periods	Not recorded

Code	Category	Position and involvement	(Main) Case relevant	Note
		comment on other experiments in the past		
C1	Academics/State	A famous scholar who worked in distance education for decades; a past leader of the Online Education/Continuing Education Department of Tanhua University but didn't directly involved in the project under research; also works in the Chinese Universities Modern Distance Education Collaborative Group (state-sponsored)	Period III	
C2	Academics/State	A famous scholar who worked in distance education for decades; a decision-maker for a third university (experiment point) that participated in the Modern Distance Education experiment; also works for the Chinese Universities Modern Distance Education Collaborative Group (state-sponsored)	Period III	
C3	Academics	A scholar who have worked in distance education and have an inside knowledge of this project though he wasn't involved directly; also an academics working in the Tanhua University	Period III	
C4	Academics	An established scholar working in social sciences	All periods	
C5	Academics	An established historian with extensive knowledge of China's higher education	All periods	
C6	Academics	An established scholar with extensive knowledge in China's higher education; also participated in a third university's (experiment point) University Bylaws drafting	All periods	

- The total numbers of interviewees are 33. However, to protect anonymity, the same institutions are given different pseudonyms in different cases. Similarly, respondents who were interviewed for different cases were given different codes. So the number of interview codes given here is higher than the total numbers of interviewees. In some interviews, the roles and positions of an interviewee are hard to distinguish or completely separate – they may have professional background in both sectors. In a certain experiment, one was interviewed as a stakeholder from university or the state; for some other experiments, the same person was interviewed as an academic with extensive knowledge and direct observation of events in question.