

Chapter 5

Comprehensive Reform of the University Governance System in China: The Paradigm of Tongji University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces and discusses changes with respect to the university governance system in China which is in the process of creating a world-class university by taking Tongji University as an example. It presents an analytical framework on the basis of four powers: (1) the internal democratic nature of the governance structure, (2) the external involvement in university governance, (3) the level of centralization of the decision-making authority in the university, and (4) the concentration of authority in an individual leadership position versus authority in a collective body or spread over various collective bodies. It analyzes and summarizes the reforms of three colleges at Tongji University in these four aspects and puts forward some reasonable suggestions for other universities.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, many national reforms have been initiated in China with the aim of strengthening the executive capacity of public universities. The internal leadership system of the university is mainly carried out between the responsibility of the university presidents, the responsibility of the University Council under the leadership of the Party committee and the responsibility of the university presidents under the leadership of the Party committee.

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In 1989, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) decided that the higher education institutions still implemented the president responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee, stating: “The practice proves that the implementation of the responsibility of university presidents under the leadership of the party committee is beneficial to ensuring the university’s socialist direction and comprehensively achieving the talent training goals”. In 1998, the Higher Education Law of the People’s Republic of China clearly stated in the legal form that the current leadership system of the university is “the president’s responsibility under the leadership of the Party organizations at the primary level”, that is, the president has the responsibility under the leadership of the party committee of the university.

Before the reform and opening up policy, Chinese universities were completely controlled by the government. The government was both the organizer and the administrator. In May 1985 the “Decision of the Central Committee of the CPC on the Reform of the Education System” proposed to expand the autonomy of higher education institutions. The government and the education administration have taken a series of measures. The functions of the government no longer include university administration. Instead, they provide policies, regulatory services and laws for the development of higher education. In addition, the transfer of more power from the central government to the local government has significantly increased the enthusiasm of local universities. In 1998, the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Higher Education” was promulgated, and the autonomy of higher education institutions was determined in legal form.

The Responsibility of University Presidents Under the Leadership of the Party

University governance is generally divided into “external governance” that harmonizes the interests of universities with the government and society and the “internal governance” that harmonizes the various rights and relations within the universities (Yang, 2018). In the past ten years, the external environment has been greatly improved. The country has gradually begun to pay more attention to internal governance issues in universities. Chinese education reform and development of long-term planning programs (2010—2020) clearly defined that its aim was: “To improve the modern university system with Chinese characteristics and the governance structure”. This was expressed in these words: “the university runs according to law, self-management, democratic supervision and social participation” (Cai & Yang, 2008). At the end of 2013, the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensive Deepening Reforms (hereinafter referred to as “the decision”) was issued. The “Decision” pointed out that it was necessary to deepen the comprehensive reform in the education field and improve the internal governance structure of the university. Perfecting the governance structure of universities is an important part of deepening the reform of higher education, and its core is to establish and improve the governance idea, institutional framework and operational mechanisms of Lide Shuren, which means fostering integrity and promoting rounded development of the people.

These reform agendas have many things in common, including the strengthening of institutional autonomy, the professionalization of institutional leadership and administration and the introduction of more competitive, performance-oriented funding models. All these items have been studied from various perspectives, which include reference to the research on the internal governance of foreign universities (Feng & Shi, 2016; Pei & Zhou, 2011; Zhang, 2010; Zhou, 2015) and research on the problems existing in the internal governance of domestic universities (Cai & Ma, 2014; Wang, 2013; Zhang & Pu, 2014),

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