
Book review

Book review: *The Development and Governance of Private Universities in China*, by Xu Liu

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Everything about China is, of course, distinctive, including its universities. Only in the case of China could an account of governmental interactions with private higher education take as its starting point the delightfully precise date of 475 BCE – that is, during the mid-Iron Age in northern Europe. Universities came and went during the next 2,000 years of China's often turbulent history, but the result was that when the People's Republic was founded in 1949, there were 205 university institutions, 81 of which were private. Private higher education, then, to put it mildly, is not a new phenomenon in China.

This account of the governance of private higher education in China today is useful and clear, although entirely uncritical and even unanalytical in respect of government policies and processes as they may affect it. The book is, it seems, based on the author's doctoral thesis – Xu Liu is an assistant professor at the Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen – and the removal of material that nobody other than doctoral examiners expect to see would have improved its readability. The presentation of her research findings about the governance and management of three private universities in short paragraphs, around 10 to a page, consisting of quotations from her informants followed by a brief comment, makes it sometimes difficult to form an overall sense of the direction of the research.

The three case studies are anonymised, although the author does not explain why she decided on this approach. As all three cases are in Sichuan Province, and a great deal of background material is provided about each of them, I would be surprised if they could not be readily identified by anyone with good local knowledge. As is often the case with anonymisation in institutional research, there is the potential for failure on two levels: informants may not in fact be protected from scrutiny as they had been led to expect, and other scholars are unable to confirm or to challenge findings. If potential informants demand confidentiality without very good reasons, then I think the researcher needs to reflect on the reliability of what they are being told.

Where this book is particularly helpful is in its account of the role of the Communist Party organisation within universities. In public universities the University Communist Party Committee (UCPC) is, Liu tells us, 'the highest authority within the university'. This is a point that may be missed by foreign visitors, as, in my experience, it is glossed over when the university hierarchy is described to them. So the structure appears very similar to what would be found in Western universities, with a university president seemingly in charge, with faculty deans responsible to him/her. In fact, 'the UCPC is officially designated to play the core role of leading the university' (Chapter 4), with faculty-level UCPC branches ensuring that every aspect of university life is subservient to the Party. The Party, in other words, makes all the key decisions in public universities in China. It would be an exaggeration, perhaps, to say that everything else is window dressing – but only a slight one.

Private universities have slightly different structures, mainly differing, Liu says, in that the role of the UCPC there deals with the 'core of politics', whereas in public ones it deals with the 'core of politics and leadership' (Table 4.3). It is a little difficult to unpick these differences; however, any Marxist–Leninist would consider that control over the politics of an institution trumps control of leadership, and indeed Liu tells us that the UCPC's role includes supervising 'the developmental direction of the university required by the government ... [with] the Secretary of the UCPC [being] appointed by the Provincial level of the Party authority in education' (Chapter 4). Private universities may be privately owned, but they are ultimately controlled by the Party, as are other ostensibly private organisations in China.

In the case studies that Liu presents in Chapter 6, the UCPC appears integrated with the university senior management team. One example of this integration is the requirement for:

the Provincial Party Education Committee [that is, the level above the UCPC in the Party structure] ... to have [a] democratic and reflective meeting and [for] all members of the Executive Team and UCPC [to] participate. In this meeting, we do self-analysis and share our reflections, and then others criticise your daily work performance.

It would be interesting to know if this criticism of performance is a two-way process; but, as 'the objective of the UCPC is to ensure that the university adheres to the direction of Socialism by following the regulations of the Communist Party and its laws', one suspects that any criticism of the UCPC's work would be seen as unhelpful in moving the university in 'the direction of Socialism' (Chapter 6). Some actual examples of this self-analysis and criticism in practice – who said what, to whom – would have enlivened the case studies but would no doubt have been treading on thin political ice.

Some of the activities of the UCPC are set by the Party centrally and implemented, it seems, through routine university activities. But it would be interesting to know what exactly was involved in the so-called 'mass line' programme of 'cleaning up undesirable work styles such as formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism and extravagance' (Chapter 6). One would like to think that a subtle ironist was responsible for calling for an attack on formalism and bureaucracy in a system that is itself a study of formalism and bureaucracy. I have never myself noticed any unbridled hedonism in visits to Chinese universities, unless a glass of Tsingtao counts; but perhaps I was just unlucky.

Liu's interest in her case studies is to tease out the different roles of the academic management of the university as distinct from the roles of the private sector shareholders, who in some instances are involved in the executive management of the institution, not simply in determining its strategy. However, 'in all three cases, the UCPC combined with the Council or (and) Executive Team to a considerable degree, almost becoming indistinguishable from them' (Chapter 9). In other words, Party control was omnipresent in all her cases. Although this is not the focus of Liu's research, one conclusion from it must be that the distinction between public and private universities in China is much less clear-cut than in most other countries, with Communist Party control determining both strategy and execution in both.