

Thesis Prospectus

University Enrollment Expansion:  
A Window Into Chinese Policy Formation and Implementation

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## **Contents**

- I. Historical background
- II. Immediate context & framing the question
- III. Theoretical background & review of literature
- IV. Hypothesis
- V. Methodology
- VI. Bibliography

## Historical Background

The history of China's higher education system is full of ups and downs, from its cultural roots in the imperial civil service examinations through to its piecemeal Westernization during the Republican era and its uneasy relationship with Maoism after the Communist Revolution. The university system found itself in a precarious position due to the dialectical tension between "red and expert" —should government base its decisions on the tenets of Maoist thought, or upon scientific and technical expertise? In the struggle to find a balance between the two, the pendulum swung first one way and then the other, but during the Cultural Revolution, "red" was the politically correct answer. Chinese academia became the target of fierce ideological opposition, which together with severe political and social turmoil made it impossible for universities to continue their normal operations or enroll new students for a number of years.<sup>1</sup>

After the Cultural Revolution gave way to Deng Xiaoping's policy of "Reform and Opening" in the late 1970s, ideological purity was set aside in favor of economic growth through market reforms. This shift brought with it not only a willingness to accommodate the opinions of experts and professionals on policy matters, but also a recognition of the key role higher education could play in economic development. Rebuilding the university system in the wake of the Cultural Revolution thus became a key policy objective of Deng's administration during the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, China's Ministry of Education made serious efforts to improve the quality of Chinese universities, notably by giving special funding and support to a small number of top-

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<sup>1</sup> Hu, S. & Seifman, E. (Eds.). (1987). *Education and Socialist modernization: A documentary history of education in the People's Republic of China, 1977-1986*. New York: AMS Press. p. 31

<sup>2</sup> Pepper, S. (1990). *China's education reform in the 1980s: Policies, issues, and historical perspectives*. Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, UC Berkeley.

tier institutions in two initiatives dubbed Project 211 and Project 985.<sup>3</sup> The steady-paced development of the Chinese higher education system, with a focus on improving educational quality and only moderate growth in terms of enrollment size, continued through 1998.

### **Immediate Context & Framing the Question**

1999 marked a radical change in the development trajectory of the Chinese university system. In June, less than two weeks before the annual college entrance examination (*Gaokao*), the government announced a plan to increase planned enrollment by 44% from the previous year. They also set a new goal to meet a 15% gross participation rate for universities by 2010, which according to international consensus would mark the threshold of “mass higher education.” In both its pace and its objective, this decision was a major departure from higher education policy throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Education’s decade-long effort to build up the quality of the university system was seemingly set aside overnight in favor of the new focus on expanding enrollment numbers. There is strong anecdotal evidence from political insiders that the 1999 policy decision was made not by education experts within the MOE, but rather was a direct intervention by the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party moving outside the established bureaucratic channels in response to economic crisis.<sup>5</sup>

It was not merely the decision to expand higher education that was unusual, however. The implementation of this policy was also surprising, with the actual rate of expansion far outpacing the original goals set by the central government. Two years after the initial decision to expand

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<sup>3</sup> Zha, Q. (2011). Understanding China’s move to mass higher education from a policy perspective. In R. Hayhoe, J. Li, J. Lin & Q. Zha, *Portraits of 21st Century Chinese Universities: In the Move to Mass Higher Education* (pp. 20-57). Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Center. 24-25

<sup>4</sup> Zha, Q., Understanding China’s move to mass higher education, p. 27

<sup>5</sup> Wang, Q. (Forthcoming). Crisis management, regime survival, and “guerrilla-style” policy-making: The June 1999 decision to radically expand higher education in China. *The China Journal*.

enrollment, the government moved the 15% target participation rate forward to 2005; but the rate of expansion surpassed even this updated plan, and the target was met in 2002 instead, tripling the size of the Chinese student body in only three years.<sup>6</sup> This feverish growth continued, and by 2008, China had the largest university student body in the world in absolute numbers, at 29 million students.<sup>7</sup> By 2010, the gross participation rate had reached 25%.<sup>8</sup> Today the Chinese higher education system has *over seven times* the number of students it did in 1998.<sup>9</sup> The actual rate of university expansion is so far in excess of the MOE's enrollment targets, it is hard to avoid the impression that both MOE education experts and members of the top leadership were to some extent powerless to control the exact way in which the policy was implemented. Related administrative and financial reforms planned by the MOE also met with limited success.

Both the decision to expand higher education and the implementation of this decision, then, were highly abnormal. The decision-making process seems to contradict the narrative that governance in reform-era China is highly standardized and bureaucratized, with technocrats and experts playing dominant roles in their areas of expertise. Furthermore, the implementation of the enrollment expansion policy and related reforms does not fit with a view of the Chinese government as centralized and authoritarian. Given these unusual features, my research question is as follows:

- *How does the formation and implementation of the policy to expand the higher education system shed light on the internal power structure of the Chinese government?*

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<sup>6</sup> Zha, Q., p. 27

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Shilu: Zhongguo renmin daxue xiaozhang ji baocheng tan kuozhao (An Interview with Ji Baocheng, President of Renmin University, on the Expansion of College Enrollment). (2008, December 10). *Jiaoyu Bao (China Education Daily)*.

<sup>9</sup> Zha, Q., p. 32

### Theoretical Background & Review of Literature

Preliminary reading shows evidence for many different dynamics within the Chinese government that influence policy formation & implementation. Two such dynamics have been described in detail in the literature I have read so far. First is the relationship between experts and area specialists on one hand, and top-ranked leaders and Party generalists on the other. This relationship is examined in Wang Qinghua's forthcoming article, which describes how established bureaucratic channels and expert policy advice are disregarded by the top leadership during times of crisis. Drawing upon previous work by Heilmann and Perry on what they term "guerrilla policy style," Wang connects this tendency with Maoist legacies, especially the old conflict between "red and expert."<sup>10</sup> However, Wang focuses entirely on the 1999 decision-making process, and does not discuss the role of experts in the actual implementation of enrollment expansion.

Another key dynamic within the Chinese government is the relationship between the central government and lower levels. Despite being an authoritarian system, provincial and local governments still exercise a certain degree of freedom to interpret policy directives as they see fit. Mayling Birney has described a new model explaining this relationship which she terms the "Rule of Mandates." Rather than manage every aspect of policy implementation in detail, the central leadership ranks its directives by priority, and "incentivize[s] lower officials to implement a subset of laws and policies that will serve their preferences."<sup>11</sup> Low-priority policy directives like environmental protection or educational quality are often ignored, or only partially implemented, if they can be construed to be in conflict with high-priority mandates like fostering

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<sup>10</sup> Wang, Q., Crisis management, regime survival, and "guerrilla-style" policy-making

<sup>11</sup> Birney, M. (Forthcoming). Decentralization and veiled corruption under China's "rule of mandates." *World Development*. p. 2

economic growth or maintaining social stability. In practice, this often means low-level officials have the freedom to act in their own interest as long as they maintain compliance with the high-priority mandates.<sup>12</sup> Although Birney's model has not yet been used to examine higher education reforms, I believe it could be a useful tool to explain the rapid pace of enrollment expansion, which was carried out largely by provincial governments and individual institutions.

More reading is required in order to explore additional theories of these two relationships, as well as to uncover additional dynamics that might also play a role, such as business interests or civil society. I will explore these theoretical frameworks in my review of literature. I also need to investigate scholarly accounts of the Chinese government's increasing bureaucratization and the rising power of technocrats and other experts, since Wang Qinghua's article calls this narrative into question.

In addition to this theoretical literature, I will continue reading academic investigations and analyses of China's move to mass higher education, including both decision making and policy implementation. One very useful source is the work of Ruth Hayhoe et al., who conducted large-scale surveys and interviews of Chinese college students.<sup>13</sup> Jun Li, one of Hayhoe's co-authors, has also written on their survey findings in independent journal articles of his own.<sup>14</sup> Two books in Zhejiang University Press's "Education in China Series" give descriptions of Chinese educational policies and legislation, which may prove to be a useful window into the functioning of the Ministry of Education.<sup>15</sup> Discussions of higher education development within

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Hayhoe, R., Li, J., Lin, J., & Zha, Q. (2011). *Portraits of 21st century Chinese universities: In the move to mass higher education*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Center.

<sup>14</sup> Li, J. (2012). The student experience in China's revolutionary move to mass higher education: Institutional challenges and policy implications. *Higher Education Policy*, Vol. 25, pp. 453-475.

<sup>15</sup> Xu, X., & Mei, W. (Eds.). (2009). *Educational policies and legislation in China*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press; Gu, J., Li, X., & Wang, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Higher Education in China*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press.

Chinese academia will also be investigated, in order to form a better picture of typical “expert” opinions about enrollment expansion. Wang Qinghua’s article includes an account of academic debate leading up to the decision to expand university enrollment.<sup>16</sup> Additional resources describing Chinese academic work on higher education development include a book by Wang Xin and a volume of articles compiled and translated by Yang Dongping.<sup>17</sup>

### Hypothesis

Based on what I have read so far in terms of both theoretical explanations of Chinese power structures as well as several descriptive and explanatory accounts of Chinese higher education expansion, I have formed the following hypothesis, which is twofold:

- *Both the decision to expand Chinese university enrollment and the implementation of this policy reflect the relationship between education experts and Party generalists. Specifically, the decision was made without regard to expert advice coming from either academia or the Ministry of Education, and plan was implemented with only limited guidance and oversight from the MOE.*
- *Additionally, the implementation of higher education expansion and related reforms reflects the relationship between the central government and lower levels. Specifically, the radical pace of expansion and the uneven nature of other reforms are the result of local governments and individual institutions acting in their own economic and political interests, rather than heeding goals and guidelines set by the MOE.*

The primary focus will be on the implementation of university enrollment expansion and related reforms, while the decision-making process will only be of secondary concern due to the limited

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<sup>16</sup> Wang, Q.

<sup>17</sup> Wang, X. (2010). *Higher education as a field of study in China: Defining knowledge and curriculum structure*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books; Yang, D., Chai, C., & Huang, S. (Eds.). (2013). *Chinese research perspectives on educational development*. (Vol. 1). Boston, MA: Brill.

amount of information available. In a nutshell, my hypothesis is that despite bureaucratization and the rise of technocrats in China's reform era, experts and professionals have only limited power to shape government policy. In the decision-making process, they are marginalized by the top leadership whenever it is politically expedient; during implementation, their efforts are frustrated by lower-level officials acting in their own interest. I believe that higher education reform is one policy area where this lack of power can be clearly seen. In order to test my hypothesis, I will compare MOE plans and goals with descriptions of actual policy outcomes.

### **Methodology**

There is a wealth of information, both quantitative and qualitative, documenting the implementation of HE expansion as well as concurrent administrative and financial reforms to the university system. These include official statistics published by the Ministry of Education as well as statistical yearbooks published by individual institutions. In addition, the survey and interview data by Hayhoe et al. will add some qualitative flavor. Finally, my own surveys and interviews gathered during at the Harbin Institute of Technology will supplement the Hayhoe data (although mine is rather amateur in comparison).

After gathering this descriptive information, I will compare it with goals, guidelines, plans, and policies set by China's Ministry of Education. The goal of this analysis will be to find what discrepancies exist between MOE plans and actual policy outcomes. I will look at variables such as student enrollment numbers, number of graduates, division of majors, tuition, teacher to student ratio, infrastructure development, composition of funding, and budget spending. I will investigate which variables, as well as which geographic regions and types of institutions, are most and least likely to meet MOE guidelines. Finally, I will attempt to determine which of the various theoretical models explored in my review of literature best explain my findings.

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