

Student Engagement with Institutional Governance in Contemporary Chinese Universities:
An Internationalization Process

by

Siyi Cheng

Bachelor of Arts, East China Normal University, China, 2016
Bachelor of Law Minor, East China Normal University, China, 2016

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Supervisory Committee

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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Andrew Marton, Department of Pacific and Asian Studies
Supervisor

Dr. Tim Anderson, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Outside Member

Abstract

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Outside Member

In recent decades, China has stood out for its active social experiment with its state-market relations and educational reforms to build internationally competitive universities. Students, as recipients of and participants in these changes, showed stakeholder awareness, subjectivity, and agency in navigating the Chinese university system, but their influence on university decision-making was unclear. Informed by a theoretical framework that incorporated the study of higher education internationalization, the associated concepts of student engagement, and a social, cultural, and institutional examination of the global-local interactions, this study explored student engagement with institutional governance in Chinese universities. Grounded in an interpretivist perspective, the research employed qualitative methods to unpack students' knowledge construction, referential framework, and constant negotiation. Research questions addressed action patterns, conceptual rationales, and the deciding powers in student engagement. This research provided a contextual analysis of policy practices, individual student experiences, and the possible impact on the international outlook of Chinese higher education.

Findings pinpointed overarching power relations within the institutional foundations of Chinese university structures, as they were highly intertwined with the university's political priorities to create a neutral and stable campus. This is evident in the monopoly of the Communist Youth League in student activities, the institutionalization of student leadership, and the daily supervision of student counsellors. While the students were invited to participate in the

peripheral structure of university governance, this structure, in turn, assimilated student voices and dissolved student unrest in the process. In the meantime, the investigation found informal interactions inspired sporadic student actions in spaces with lower-level institutionalization to push against the administrative boundaries. Students demonstrated an exceptional understanding of university power relations and their ability to act purposefully and strategically.

Despite substantive internationalization efforts of Chinese HEIs, the analysis did not suggest internationalization had a direct significant connection with student engagement in Chinese university governance. Nonetheless, Western influences on current student-university interactions were manifested in the use of instructional models, the increased use of the English language, and a vision shaped by external knowledge towards more progressive campuses.

The significance of this thesis is both scholarly and practical. This study identified the realities of Chinese higher education and the paucity of academic discussion on the student experience in Chinese universities. This research responded to the challenge of accommodating an understanding of the non-Anglo-Saxon experience with student engagement in mainstream theories developed largely in Western contexts. For policymakers and educators, the thesis highlighted the under-explored political dimensions of internationalization and the conditions for meaningful learning and engagement.

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List of Abbreviations

BBS	Bulletin Board System
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCYL	Committee of Communist Youth League
CS	Commune of Sphericity (student club)
CYL	Communist Youth League
ECNU	East China Normal University
HEI	Higher Education Institution
MOE	Ministry of Education
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
PLM	President Lunch Meeting
SAP	Student Assistant President
SCC	Student Consultative Council
SWD	Student Work Department
THE	Times Higher Education

Rules of Translation and Capitalization

This thesis uses *pinyin* system for the romanization of Chinese terms. Unless specified, all translations from Chinese to English were done by the author. Romanized Chinese phrases used in this thesis are italicised and defined within the text. Besides common rules regarding proper nouns, locales and titles, capitalization in this thesis occurs only when referring to a single specific institution or position as opposed to the existence of a certain type (e.g., the University Student Union vs. student unions).

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I was hosted, in the past three years, on the traditional territories of the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples. The land's complicated history and contemporary realties challenged my researcher identity and position with living stories that tell about the politics of inclusion and hierarchical exchanges in the world systems. It convinced me of the importance of bringing a critical lens to my daily experience and observations of today's higher education: the inherent logic of capitalism and commodity in education accompanied by the colonization of minds and knowing. Being more informed than I ever was, I am prompted to ask what I can do for our future education. What is needed by educational researchers and practitioners to ensure

future generations will have it better? This keeps me up at night, but a group of remarkable mentors and admired exemplars put a smile on my face every day.

I want to express my sincere appreciation for Dr. Hui Zhang and Dr. Yujing Zhu for their continued mentorship of my academic life and well-being since I was a freshman at East China Normal University. Over nearly a decade, they offered me genuine friendship and saw me through struggles and growth to be who I am today. I am grateful to mention Dr. Xu Li at Southern University of Science and Technology in China, whom I look up to as a role model to bridge practice and scholarship. Her bountiful enthusiasm and innovative vision keep reminding me of our purpose of higher learning to serve the public.

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fortunate to have you, whose selfless love and firmest faith in me created miracles one after another. You are the most resilient person I know and I cannot be prouder to inherit that strength. My old friends, Serena and Lingyue, are family. It goes without saying that I am deeply loved by you and I love you deeply.

To all those have given me greatest kindness in the past years, thank you.

Dedication

To Dada, my grandfather, Youyu Xue.

Who lives on in my heart with kindness and integrity.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Journey to this Study

Before the discussion of Chinese university students' campus life unfolds, I wish to present a few pictures of my life at East China Normal University (hereafter ECNU) from just a few years ago. The intention is to position this study for readers who may not be familiar with the Chinese experience. Here is what I remember. It was mandatory for all undergraduate students to live in gender-separate dormitories on campus. We were assigned rooms based on our student ID numbers, which were all associated with our major, cohort, and administrative class. Dorms were identical in layout, and each rectangular room was shared by four undergraduate students. In order to accommodate four individuals in a confined space, a bed deck was positioned over one's work station adjacent to a mini closet. This furniture combination formed the main living area for a student resident. Students usually remained in their original room assignment throughout their undergraduate studies unless significant issues emerged, which meant most students had the same roommates, floor mates, and building friends over the course of four years. Every floor had a long corridor with rooms on both sides – a total of over 30 rooms – and three washrooms shared by the 130 students on the floor. One public shower-room was located on the first floor, open from noon to 11 p.m., for all residents of six floors of the building. By the time I left ECNU in 2016, there were 23 dormitory buildings for undergraduate students.

As students lived in residences without kitchenettes, they were expected to dine on campus. Canteens, were undoubtedly one of the most important places for students' life on campus. With the move to mass higher education since the 1990s, ECNU is a typical university

among the many Chinese universities that have recently relocated their main campuses to suburban areas for more land to house students and academic facilities. Consequently, students were greatly isolated on these new campuses remote from the vibrancy of urban events and faculty interactions (Hayhoe, Zha, & Li, 2012). When the canteen did not provide satisfying meal options, and with no cooking space or other affordable alternatives, for some students, life became unbearable. While it may not be possible for students to have their room expanded or their air conditioning installed within a short time due to the extensive expenses and planning, students knew it was always less challenging to have their favourite dish back on the menu next semester. Complaints about the canteen food were sometimes used to vent dissatisfaction about the overall campus experience. In public universities, food services are government subsidized and are provided by a for-profit third party. Student complaints also keep the outsourcing process in check for corruption and bureaucratic issues. The campus canteen resembles a miniature development history of the modern Chinese university and its relationship with the state, the market, and the students it serves. Thus, it is no surprise that research for this thesis identified the canteen as the birth-place for some of the recent student activism on campus.

Residences, including dormitory buildings, canteens, and some grocery stores, are a large communal life space for students. Different from North American universities that design residences to be organic communities and employ professional and student staff to run residence life and educational programs, Chinese university residences were created solely for the purpose of housing students altogether following a Soviet Communist model providing minimal public facilities for informal interaction, study, or entertainment. With high population density and extremely limited private space, students living in residence are also constantly exposed, which means they are more trackable and any abnormal activities or behaviours are more immediately

noticeable. Dormitories are essentially social units that also overlap with one's administrative and academic unit. The hardships of surviving four years of residence life reinforce the identities of individual students as part of a collective mindset at a critical phase in their young adulthood.

Meanwhile, since the early 2000s, China experienced a dramatic increase in the marketization of education in its economic reforms, and the massification of university access was reflected in the significant growth of enrollments (Frolovskiy, 2017). Recent social and economic transformation in China has significantly improved quality of life, and people's understanding of higher education has shifted from an elite luxury to a market choice. Today, the living standards of university residences are significantly lower than the average off-campus housing experience. University administrators started to notice that their campuses were becoming spaces of unrest as more demanding students became dissatisfied and grievances would more easily ferment if not addressed proactively by the university. At the same time, higher education researchers noticed a lack of attention to educationally meaningful areas they used to believe were neutral and non-relevant, such as residences and supporting services. In response to the two issues, a series of measures were initiated to enforce stronger regulation of student activism but through applicable educational and leadership models. Some of these measures echoed the state's demand on elite universities to be more "international" as such models were usually adapted from international ideas and examples of best practice.

The speed of China's economic and educational development in the past decades has been unprecedented (Li, Whalley, Zhang, & Zhao, 2008). Changes on university campuses relevant to the research undertaken for this study revolve around the intersection of state authority, marketization, and globalization. The questions that inform this study are: How do universities operate today? What can we learn tell from student life and student engagement with

their universities? Is the Chinese university merely a site of control by the Communist regime, with passive and disciplined students experiencing state censorship and a Communist curriculum; and/or is it a place for the flooding-in of globalized ideas and practices as part of a troubling new foreign imperialism and unpredictable future (Cai, 2004; J. Li, 2012; Min, 2004; Vidovich, Yang, & Currie, 2007). This study examines how some Chinese university students voice their concerns about and participate in university decisions. Whether or not this new trend of student engagement with institutional governance will bring about any meaningful long-term change in the operation of Chinese universities is an open-ended question. A detailed examination of the intricate relationships between the university and its students in today's China will be a timely first step to illustrate the realities, tensions, and underlying forces which must be understood in order to answer such questions.

As a former student at a public research university in China and current researcher in the Canadian system, my first-hand experience and observations have prompted me to critically reflect on the recent transformations of Chinese higher education. Ultimately, this research project is conceived with a motivation to present a contextual analysis of policy practices, individual student experiences, and the possible impact on the international outlook of Chinese higher education.

The Context of the Research

A Brief History of Modern Chinese University Governance.

After the first Opium War in 1838-1942, China started to transition from a feudal empire into a modern society with the birth of modern universities. Despite China's long history of civilization, China as a modern nation-state only came into being when the Reform Movement of 1889 took place. In the same year, Peking University was formally established as the first

modern university in China, founded at the time as the Imperial University of Peking to replace a traditional imperial academy. The co-creation of modern China and its university system brought university and state closely together and left perpetual influence on the later development of higher education in China. The governance model and structure of Chinese universities has always been inseparable from the influence of the state (D. Zhang, 2016). During the 20th century, while the state power was weak, Chinese universities enjoyed substantial autonomy and rapid development (Jiang & Wang, 2014). When the Communist Party took over China in 1949 and formed a socialist state under the leadership of Chairman Mao, the growing state authority gradually took over university autonomy and university governance.

With common commitments to construct a socialist realm, China found the Soviet Union model attractive in 1950s and relied heavily on their partnership for economic and technological support (J. Li, 2017). During the New China regime, the Chinese state advocated for a planned economy, in which the Communist-government controlled market, culture, and ideology. The development of China's higher education system after 1949 was solely modelled after the Soviet Union. As a Soviet legacy, political power permeated all social domains in China, including university campus. It decided a university management model, enrollment plans and regional distribution, leadership and power structures. Public records showed that the Chinese university leadership system changed five times over the span of 28 years during this period of time, swinging between tight or loose state control over university institution in accordance to the central government's frequent policy updates (D. Zhang, 2016).

Universities were not just subordinate units administered by the government. The government's logic of administration also extended directly to Chinese universities. Within a university existed a vertical administrative hierarchy of “university → department →

disciplinary group”; directors, deans of institutes, and department heads were appointed and given “office status” (*xingzheng jibie*) in accordance with government administrative rankings (Hu, 2015). Deans and chairs of academic units were often the executors of higher powers, which greatly limited their ability to facilitate communication or coordinate research and teaching activities horizontally across the campus, making it possible for administrative power to override academic power (Zheng, Liu, & Meng, 2012). This overshadowing governmental structure in university settings resulted in serious problems education researchers today characterize as the “administrationalization” of higher education in China, including major barriers to university autonomy, displayed in bureaucracy, power struggles, and academic corruption (H. Li, 2011; Zhao, 1999; Zheng et al., 2012).

Regardless of the issues that arose from the Soviet-style bureaucratic system, the Chinese university system was effective in implementing national reforms and realizing developmental goals, particularly in increasing university enrollment since 1999. Despite insufficient funding, inadequate school preparation, shortage of teachers, equipment and infrastructure at times, under the state mandate, the total number of students in higher education nationwide increased from 6.43 million in 1998 to 35.59 million in 2014 (Qi & Li, 2018; D. Zhang, 2016). In 1996, the country’s gross higher education enrollment rate was 8.03%; six years later, by 2002, it already reached 15%, achieving the goal of higher education massification (Mi, Wen, & Zhou, 2003). In 2010, Chinese higher education institutions (hereafter as HEIs) enrolled 29.21 million students, far exceeding any other countries (Zhou & Zhou, 2012). This is unprecedented in the history of higher education in China and worldwide. Moreover, HEIs maintained relative internal stability to survive the three decades of rapid changes and successfully transitioned to the massification mode with minimal turbulence (Jiang & Wang, 2014; D. Zhang, 2016). The rapid and substantial

progress achieved by Chinese higher education would be impossible without the strong political forces and intervention in the university system to mobilize changes.

The strong political intervention in Chinese universities also created tensions in university's governance internally and externally. Since the Opening-up and Reforms began in 1978, China has actively experimented with its state-market-society relationships. A distinctive feature of this stage was the adjustment of state power to stimulate social vitality while protecting political stability and compliance. Higher education massification and the re-emergence of market economy intensified the tensions in university governance. Externally, the state tried to maintain effective control while allowing universities with moderate autonomy for institutional growth (Jiang & Wang, 2014). Internally, universities were pressured to reform its administration to address educational and service needs for rapid growth in the number of students (Wan, 2006). From 2010 and onwards, China has been exploring a university governance system with Chinese characteristics. The ambition was reflected in an authorized national reform plan as “to ameliorate university governance structure” in the *Outline of the National Medium-Term and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)* (Ministry of Education, 2010, Article 40). The system of “presidential accountability under the leadership of university Party committee” (*tuanwei lingdao xia de xiaozhang fuzezhi*) was defined as the legitimate governance model (Zhang & Wang, 2014). Importantly, the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter as CCP) and the institutional CCP committees not only provide political leadership and holistic planning in Chinese HEIs, but also appoint university administration. The university president, as the legal representative of the school, is treated as government cadre and may exercise their administrative powers only under the leadership of the

University CCP Committee, which subjects university governance to external/government forces.

The Communist Youth League as Institutionalized Youth Leadership.

A student's life outside the classroom on a Chinese university campus is managed through a comprehensive hierarchical system. To establish institutionalized control over the universities, a three-pronged bureaucracy, comprising the CCP, the Communist Youth League (hereafter as CYL), and the Student Work Department (*xuegong bu*, hereafter as SWD) has been in place since the 1980s (Yan, 2014).

The CYL is another state apparatus in every Chinese university to replicate the CCP's political influence in leading and organizing student affairs. According to the CYL bylaw, if membership exceeds two hundred persons, which is almost always true in any Chinese university, Committees of the CYL (*tuanwei*) are established to organize the work of local CYL units on campus that exist at all cohort, department, and faculty levels. At all these levels the hierarchy is the same: the CYL takes directives from CCP and supervises the student organizations (Doyon, 2017).

The historical legacies of Chinese universities and administrative restraints in its governance today has been shaped by a system that is unique to China. The CYL was formed in 1920 to recruit young people between the ages of 14 and 28 to promote Communist ideology and select political talents. In time, the CYL developed into the Communist Party's core youth organization since the establishment of the New China in 1949 (Doyon, 2017, p.84). As the State Council put it, it is the CCPs "assistant and reserve force". The CYL missions include implementing CCP's policies into the management of youth affairs and providing a training ground for potential Party-State officials (State Council, n.d.).

Since the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the CYL has grew into a political control instrument, this became particularly true after the short liberal era of the 1980s which ended in students taking their political disputes to the streets in 1989. The Student Movement of 1989 marked a significant shift in enforcing political control in Chinese universities. Facing a continuous challenge of university student loyalty, the Chinese regime accordingly assigned the CYL to serve as an institutional safety valve with the task to keep the youth “satisfied” (Tsimonis, 2018). Today, despite of the CYL’s modern progressive presentation in media and social media to fit in the current student demographics, its dominance over student engagement pathways with apolitical or less obviously political activities contributed to a tight grip over this historically important force in Chinese politics. Scholars such as Tsimonis (2018) believed that through indoctrination, control, and coercion, Chinese university students were domesticated by either being convinced of the current political arrangements or led to political apathy.

The perpetuating influence of the CCP and the integration of the CYL for student activities demonstrated a prominent theme of political control in university governance and student life. While this section talks about the broad definitions and norms of the CYL, it is noteworthy that Chinese universities may display institutional setups in slightly different ways informed by local contexts and leadership styles.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to understand student engagement with institutional governance on a Chinese university campus. Under the overarching research question of “How do student engage in the governance of a large Chinese research university?”, this thesis also examines the extent to which internationalization impacts the dynamics of such engagement. The project will focus on 1) understanding Chinese students’ position in university governance; 2)

identifying the influences of internationalization and “glo-calization” processes in Chinese university governance.

Defining the Research Questions

To respond to the broad question of student engagement with institutional governance in China, this thesis raises the following main research questions and subquestions:

What are the patterns of student-university interaction in the area of governance?

- How are Chinese students engaged in the university governing system?
- How do students interact with their institution in decision-making processes?

What are the ways in which students frame questions, concerns, and observations?

- Where are the tensions, spaces of action, and negotiations, and why do they exist?
- How do students perceive and reflect on their activities, directly or broadly in relation to university governance?

How do power and external influences affect student experiences?

- How is power manifested in the governing process at an elite research university in China?
- How do globalized practices and the local social reality of China interact and shape the internationalization of the university?

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis progressively unfolds in five chapters to answer the research questions raised. Chapter 1 outlines the contexts of this study and frames the research questions. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework of this study by discussing the main concepts associated with higher education internationalization, student engagement, and global-local interactions. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, including data collection and analysis techniques

employed in this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of a variety of student engagement from formal to informal interactions with the university, through which analysis examines power relations and tensions. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings to further reflect on the key themes of student engagement patterns, power and politics, and the glo-calization process. The thesis concludes by highlighting its contribution to the field of study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This study is broadly informed by three sets of theoretical perspectives framing the ideas of higher education internationalization, student engagement, and global-local interactions. The first section distinguishes conflating terms of globalization from internationalization and their rationale in higher education. The second section reviews key concepts associated with the student experience, including student engagement, self-authorship, agency, and the political dimensions of engagement. The third section introduces a global-local analysis framework to examine the international influences and the local institutional capacity, including the significance of organizational culture, in Chinese universities.

The Study of Higher Education Internationalization

Despite vigorous debates on whether the efforts for higher education internationalization have been successful, the meaning of “internationalization” remains conceptually elusive, if not ill-defined. There is little consensus on its exact definitions, while those pervasively used are commonly intertwined with similar ideas, notably globalization (Tian & Lowe, 2009; Yuan, 2011). This study adopts Knight’s working definition of internationalization updated in 2003:

Internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education. (p. 2)

Knight (2014) distinguished the relationship between internationalization and globalization by identifying internationalization as a response to the impacts of globalization, “albeit a response in a proactive way”, where a cause-effect dimension exists (p. 14). Under this definition, university internationalization is shown as the policies and programs implemented to

respond to globalization. This study adopts the term globalization stated by Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009) to study educational phenomena:

We define globalization as the reality shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology, the emergence of an international knowledge network, the role of the English language, and other forces beyond the control of academic institutions. (as cited in De Wit, 2011, p.243)

Scholars such as Yang (2002) suggested that globalization of higher education is an unequal process that may potentially bring negative consequences for some countries than others. While globalization and internationalization both include reciprocal exchange of people, ideas, good and services, the former presents an asymmetrical relationship with the Western dominance leading global assimilation towards homogeneity.

Internationalization practices in higher education largely outpaced theoretical studies. International initiatives, commonly represented by overseas student and faculty mobility, international research partnerships, and the internationalization of curricula, have been taken up across HEIs worldwide (Altbach, 2002; see also in individual university internationalization strategy documents). Considerable criticism of current internationalization practices is found in many contemporary studies. Researchers noted a global trend towards reducing the role of the state in higher education and increasing the role of the market and the individuals (e.g., G. Schuetze, Álvarez Mendiola, & Conrad, 2012). Some scholars examined the changing dynamics under a *neoliberal* framework of political economy, highlighting how HEIs and higher education research became an instrument for global economic competition (e.g., Canaan & Shumar, 2008). The prevailing dangers of “globalist-internationalization” in higher education, shown as lacking mediation and reflection at the local level, are hindering true or good internationalization in higher education (Ma & Yue, 2015).

Meaningful internationalization is seen by another group of researchers as “existential internationalization”, which focuses on individual learning outcomes. As one of the most significant components of higher education internationalization, Tian and Lowe’s (2009) study of international student mobility suggested institutional failure in stimulating intercultural interactions between diverse student groups on campus, which negatively impact students’ international sensibilities. They suggested that internationalization is now more symbolic at the institutional level than personally meaningful for those who participate in it. Similarly, discussions about the impacts of internationalization on student learning tend to fall solely on the international student body. Approaches to facilitate local community and domestic students’ learning in the process of institutional internationalization are still largely obscured.

Rationale for Internationalization in Chinese Educational Reform.

Higher education governance in the People’s Republic of China since its founding is often described as a highly centralized system where the HEIs are explicitly branches of the state apparatus (H. Li, 2011; Zha, 2009). Since the Reform and Opening Up in the 1980s, there has been tremendous effort to redefine the relation among the state, the market and the HEIs (Guo & Guo, 2016; H. Li, 2011). As a result of the National Budget Reform in 1986, the Chinese state began to shift away from the heavily centralized education sector model to a predominantly market-based model (Bureau of Statistics Council, 2005; Zha, 2009). In higher education, the state has transferred substantial financial as well as management and supervision responsibility from the central ministries to lower levels of government. However, elite universities continue to be public, state-regulated, and supervised by the Ministry of Education (hereafter as MOE) directly. These HEIs receive their funding from the central government through national initiatives such as “985” and “211”, a central government strategy to support research

universities through preferential allocation of resources (Rhoads, Shi, & Chang, 2014; Zong & Zhang, 2019). The 39 universities under *Project 985* and 100 universities under *Project 211* are representative of China's prestigious and first-tier higher education institutions that have contributed significantly to the nation's academic reputation.

China has shown the ambition to build its own institutions with global recognition on par with the "Ivy League" schools. In the hope of revitalizing Chinese higher education and building up globally competitive institutions to drive economic development, the recent quest for "world-class universities" drive policy initiatives at Chinese elite universities. To achieve this goal, internationalization has been a major facet of the institutional reform initiatives, leading to a series of state-directed initiatives and heated discussions nationwide. Rationales for higher education internationalization include political, economic, academic, and cultural aspects (Knight, 1977; Jiang, 2008). In different socioeconomic contexts, priorities may vary, represented by a selective adoption of internationalization strategies (Wang, 2014; Zha, 2003). However, economic motivation has been viewed as the dominant rationale behind internationalization almost of all times (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008). China is no exception.

The Chinese state has shifted a few times in its focus in higher education internationalization discourses, but economic stimuli remains a crucial drive. Between 1978 to 1992, during the first phase of internationalization, China witnessed a shift in national mentality from self-isolation to opening up, actively seeking connections with the world; during the 1990s, internationalization became important for economic competition and the transformation of elite higher education to mass higher education with rapid enrollment expansion; the new millennium has seen international initiatives implemented in research universities to attract overseas talents, reform curricula and administrative structures (Huang, 2003; Ross & Lou, 2005).

The mission of building first tier universities acts out the national aspiration for China's HEIs to gain a favorable international profile in the global playing field. The collective and nation-building mentality is fundamental in the development of Chinese HEIs. It defines the university's approach towards student engagement especially with institutional governance, which is revealed to be inevitably different from the commonly accepted Western concepts of "engagement" to be discussed in next section.

Concepts Associated with Student Engagement

This thesis addresses a specific perspective of engagement: students' involvement in institutional operation. This type of engagement has a direct impact on students' university experiences and reflects the student-university relationship shaped by the institution and the social contexts.

The emphasis on and practice of student participation in university decision-making can be traced back to medieval universities in Europe as a legacy of church, when university demanded autonomy in the face of the government to protect its status value and developed its self-governance infrastructure that included students as part of its elite intellectual interest group (Zhong, 1997). The late 1960s saw the emergence of student activism in Bologna University which led to student representation as a collective body in the higher education governance in basically every European country later (Bergan, 2004; Persson, 2003). Student participation in higher education governance was featured prominently within the "Bologna Process", a voluntary higher education reform process commenced in 1998/99 (Klemenčič, 2012). After student engagement with institutional governance has been accepted as a fundamental principle of modern universities, the original focus on representation and feedback mechanism concerning institutional policy and processes improvement also expanded (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

Recently, informed by the notion of civic engagement, more universities have seen engagement itself as a desirable educational outcome that builds active and responsible citizenship in their students (Klemenčič, 2011; Millican & Bourner, 2011).

A comparative examination of student power in this study offers a comparative account of not only how formal and informal venues of student participation and representation in university governance vary but also in national tertiary education policy processes (Klemenčič, 2014). In alignment with preliminary observations on Chinese universities, the level of student engagement, whether wanted or unwanted by the university, has been increasing with students' stronger identity as stakeholder. This happened at the same time when substantial programs were launched for the goal of internationalization in Chinese universities. The prominent trend of higher education internationalization in China will directly inform our understanding of its student engagement pattern and the its contemporary relevance to the new student-university dynamics observed in its unique cultural context. To further discuss the complexities of Chinese university student engagement, the concepts of student engagement, self-authorship, and student agency broadly studied in the Anglo-Saxon context will facilitate our understanding of students' actions within and interactions with their HEIs. The aligned notions of citizenship and political implications are also informative for this study.

Student Engagement, Authorship and Agency.

Student engagement is a broad and diverse concept. It has become a defining feature of the contemporary higher education landscape. Since Kuh's (2003) *National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE) assessed student engagement empirically at the intersection of student behavior and institutional conditions in the U.S., the concept of "student engagement" has gained considerable attention from researchers and educators.

This thesis adopts Trowler's (2010) definition of student engaged adapted from various definitions in the literature, as it best describes the idea of engagement in this study:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution (p. 3).

When Kuh and his associates proposed the concept of student engagement, it was viewed as a significant indicator of student success that should be purposefully facilitated by creating supportive campus environment (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Across a substantial body of literature, student engagement is associated with a seemingly endless list of factors that contribute to positive student personal development and college experience: it increases retention (Tinto, 2006; Thomas, 2012), facilitates academic and social integration (Pike & Kuh, 2005) , encourages successful transition (Vinson et al., 2010), and enhances student performance and satisfaction (Kuh et al., 2005). In the years following Kuh's reports, studies have consistently illuminated the positive outcomes of student engagement. A myriad of literature examined a wide variety of curricular and extra-curricular activities to facilitate learning, improve students' experiences, and promoting student success overall.

Paucity in Student Engagement Studies on Governance

Despite the merits of the student engagement literature in improving our understanding of student-centered education, it has focused primarily on teaching and learning practices rather than on the issues of student governance *per se*. Trowler (2010) suggested “a discursive orientation” in journal articles on student engagement with institutional governance (p. 20). Direct reference to student engagement with institutional governance has been rare, which posed a major challenge to position this study amongst extant literature.

As the idea of student engagement in university governance is associated with other key words of discussion, such as student representation and involvement in the decision-making process of university operation, these literatures sheds light on the development of student engagement with university governance. At the institutional level, a major steer for student engagement has come from quality assurance (Carey, 2013). During ongoing quality assurance/enhancement projects, student engagement with university operations is seen valuable when it comes to refining curricula (Bovill, Morss, & Bulley, 2011) and enriching both the student and the staff/faculty experience (Streeting, Wise, & QAA, 2009). As observed in these universities, student engagement in structures and systems, like student-staff liaison committees, once highlighted as good practice in subject review and institutional audit, is now routine (Kay, Dunne, & Hutchinson, 2011). Ideally, student engagement in governance through these activities is educationally meaningful for students to take responsibilities for their learning and actively construct their experience; however, established campus governance structures can also be a double sword in reality as they “ignore or limit active, meaningful involvement by students” (Magolda, 2005, p. 1).

Student engagement is subjected to contextual influences (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). This is particularly true with relation to institutional governance. Luescher-Mamashela (2013) raised four cases for student representation: the political-realist case that establishes formal structures between student leadership and university authorities to reduce student disputes for a more orderly campus; the consumerist case that enhances student experience as an educational product and service; the communitarian case that adopts a co-production approach and is reinforced by democratic norms and values; and the democratic and consequentialist cases that justify student engagement as an essential part of citizenship

education and a pathway to political socialization in the broader political community. With each case, students are viewed differently, as internal stakeholders, product clients, powerful agents, and active citizens. Similarly, Klemenčič (2011) proposed four intensity levels of student participation within HEIs: access to information (providing information to be acknowledged by students), consultation (asking students for feedback but without guarantee of consideration), dialogue (interaction between student representatives and university authorities with shared objectives and interests), and partnership (sharing equal responsibilities in the decision-making processes).

The variation of intensity signals the student-university relationship and the institutional approach. This typological analysis echoes Carey (2018)'s recent study that suggests a nested hierarchy of student engagement interactions to distinguish different student participation pattern based on the institutional drive for their engagement. In Figure 1, students can be viewed as change agents, partners, participants, or merely sources of data as the institutional approaches change accordingly. The degree to which students are engaged with university governance is constructed by the institution depending on organizational culture and administrative demands. In most institutions, it is also a combination of ideas and techniques employed at different levels.

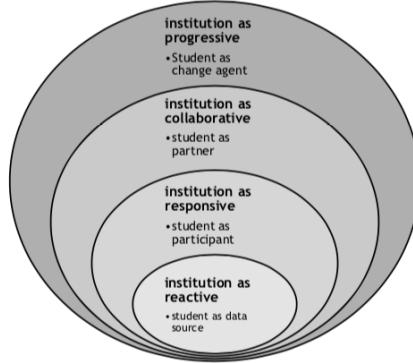


Figure 1. Nested Hierarchy of Student Engagement Interactions. Reprinted from “The Impact of Institutional Culture, Policy and Process on Student Engagement in University Decision-Making”, by P. Carey, 2018, *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 22(1), p. 13. Copyright 2016 by Informa UK Limited.

Critiques of Student Engagement Studies.

As the globalization of higher education deepens, the powerful ideological influence associated with the discourse of student engagement has drawn considerable criticism (Gourlay, 2017). Among recent critiques of the student engagement theory and NSSE report, the interrogation of its application to non-U.S. students came to scholarly attention. As the theory defines desirable behaviours for measurement, scholars such as Suderman (2015) questioned if “retention, satisfaction, and GPA represent universal aims of education” (p. 68). She advised that these instruments have limited relevance for students internationally and an uncritical use of the student engagement theory may risk conflating behavior with learning (Suderman, 2015). This was reflected in the Chinese NSSE program led by Heidi Ross (Ross, Cen, & Shi, 2014; H. Zhu, 2010). If the underlying assumptions of the desirable engagement behaviours fail to translate to another cultural context, the outcomes may lose their educational meaning and pursuing such behaviours will not benefit students, and *vice versa*. When the expectation and perception about

learning outcomes change, students may demonstrate different behavioral indicators for authentic engagement.

In the past decade, the critique of student engagement theory remained active. In the meantime, scholars showed interests in conceptualizing the nature of learning through engagement and the transformative process to recognize agency in day-to-day student practices towards “a richer and more nuanced understanding of student engagement” (Gourlay, 2017). Klemenčič (2017) suggested using student-centered learning as a “meta-concept” rather than standardized practices of engagement. This thesis presents the idea of student agency and self-authorship as a response to the student engagement critiques.

Student Agency and Self-authorship.

Plenty of interdisciplinary research appeared to combine developmental psychology, social-material analysis, and organizational studies to further our understanding of learning from its internal mechanism to external structures (Mezirow, 1991; Simon, 1991; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Scholars such as Klemenčič (2017) argued for educators to address student autonomy, self-regulation and choice as the meta-elements of self-learning. To examine students’ learning and growth through their engagement practices requires educators to identify students’ self-reflective and intentional interaction with their environment. The nature of engagement indicators suggested in the aforementioned “desirable behaviors” is the development of student agency and self-authorship.

A growing body of literature explores how human agency - individual and collective - shapes HEIs, and how institutions enable or hamper such power exercise (Klemenčič, 2015b). Klemenčič (2015a) conceptualized students’ agency as capacity and propensity for purposeful initiatives. Student agency in a university setting consists of two sections: “students’ will, the

agentic possibilities, and power, the agentic orientation” (Klemenčič, 2015a, p. 16). It is also closely connected with the notion of “self-authorship” described by Baxter Magolda (2008) as “the internal capacity to define one’s belief system, identity and the relationships”, an instrument for student development (p. 269). These concepts attempt to end the segmented discussions of behaviours in student development by presenting a holistic and multidimensional view (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Kegan, 1994). With a strong belief that students are co-producers of their educational experiences, implications of the self-authorship concept urge educators to be aware of the administrative influences in student learning and to promote partnership designs in their practice (Baxter Magolda, 2007; King, 2014).

Nevertheless, the majority of empirical investigations exploring student development practices have been documented in the Anglo-Saxon contexts, particularly in the U.S. and Europe. Research on contemporary student engagement and cognitive learning in Asia remains theoretically underdeveloped and empirically understudied. Moreover, as authoritarian regimes differ drastically from democratic models in the U.S. and many European states, little attention has been paid to unpacking student agency and self-authorship in university processes of Asian countries. Only recently researchers such as R. Zhang (2009) attempted to identify spaces of action and student grievances in Chinese universities.

R. Zhang’s (2009) work provides a unique lens for this study to analyze findings of student action within the Chinese context. According to Zhang, Chinese students were more assertive and effective in their rights-claiming activities in the area of supporting services than in disciplinary disputes. She also questioned the set categories, such as university administration or student rights, as the unit of analysis in educational research and suggested further examination of “what happens in the process of educational governance more closely” for the subtlety and

diversity (R. Zhang, 2009, p. 327). Hence, her proposal of “spaces of action” is suitable for the study of the Chinese experience as it allows a close investigation of student agency in university governance processes.

A Challenge to Study the Chinese Experience.

Locating this research in the Chinese context adds another layer of difficulty in the literature. In the Chinese literature, student engagement with institutional governance was closest to the field of research on organized student activities and campus-based student groups emerged since Duan (1986) pointed out the implications of student organizations in Chinese education for the first time. The study of university student organizations in China embodied a pragmatic connotation that emphasized the use of student participation as services to university governance under a particular political and ideological education framework. Engaging students through leadership opportunities created by the university through student organization was to increase efficiency of the institution and to regulate their contingent groups on campus (Zhu, Xu, & Chen, 2017).

Locating productive sources of literature was problematic in both China and the wider academic community. The study of students in university governance has been heavily concentrated on regulating student expression and collective actions from a practitioner perspective (Cai & Feng, 2008; Hong, 2015; Hu, 2005; Y. Li, 2013; L. Y. Sun, 2011; Wang, 2010; Wang & Zhou, 2008; Yu, 2013). Contributors to these studies were mostly gate-keepers of student activities on Chinese campuses. While it is concerning that a great number of the publications were not theoretically well-informed, they were also biased towards political priorities. Unfortunately, the “student cadre” experience and their key role in the current student-university relationship in Chinese universities was almost completely absent from the English

scholarship at the same time: the current literature largely leaves this group undocumented and omitted (Doyon, 2017; Yan, 2014).

Power was at the core of student governance engagement, which was fundamentally restrained in Chinese students. Some scholars compared the Western versus Chinese student experience of governance engagement from a historical lens (Li & Gao, 2011; Xu & Su, 2011; Zheng, 2006). They identified the root of power for European and North American students was the massive student movements and riots in the 1960s. The radical advocates led to rational cooperation later with the institutions to establish procedures for student participation in university settings (Li & Gao, 2011). Since the activism, student organizations in Western universities enjoyed a high level of autonomy for self-governance. In comparison, students in China in general lacked legal support for them to confront their institutions when they were violated either from within the university or outside of it in the court (Xu & Su, 2011; G. Zhu, 2011). When student rights were not properly acknowledged, critical questions arose as to how effectively students were represented and how authentic the engagement activities were in university governance. The management of Chinese student organizations was primarily the technique of distributing administrative power rather than the development of leadership skills (Zhu et al., 2017). In addition, student organizations inherited the legacy of the traditional Confucian cultural roots that valued serving and downplayed entitlement.

The Political Dimension of Engagement and Citizenship.

Since Mezirow and Freire opened up conversations addressing learners' inner meaning, reflective capacity, and liberating drive for social changes (Mezirow, 1991; Kitchenham, 2008; Freire, 1985), the literature on transformative education and citizenship development has proliferated. In an era of globalization, good education is expected to help individuals become

informed, engaged citizens with a sense of interconnectedness. Schools are crucial agents for citizenship development. Carey (2013) adopted a public participation framework to understand student participation in university decision-making as a process to infer the ambition of student engagement. It is now widely acknowledged that citizenship education and engagement opportunities for students in university governance are preparations for students' wider civic participation in their adulthood (Zhang & Fagan, 2016).

However, current educational practices are still some steps behind as HEIs need to examine their preparedness and capacities for delivering these alleged educational goals. A quantitative survey conducted in Hong Kong on students' participation in school governance and their citizenship development revealed that students were only superficially involved in governance as schools were more inclined to an informational or consultative approach than conferring real powers to engage students (Leung, Yuen, Cheng, & Chow, 2014). This disappointing commonality exists in many university practices for civic engagement: while political education curriculum alone is insufficient on university students' civic perceptions and participation, current practice in university governance is as not helpful as expected for nurturing active citizenship either.

Students' citizenship representation and civic activities always synchronize with societal transitions. China and its education system, in the past century, have undergone more dramatic changes than most countries in this world as Wright (2012) summarized:

... China has moved from a tumultuous "Republican" government (1911–49), to radical Maoist rule (1949–76), to pragmatic yet somewhat divided Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership (1976–89), to pragmatic and united CCP governance (1990–present). Along with these changes in polity, China's educational system has been continuously transformed—moving from a traditional Confucian/feudal elitist model, to a Western elitist system, to a Maoist egalitarian model emphasizing manual labor

and ideological purity, to a pragmatic elitist model, to a commercialized and “massified” system. (p. 33)

Chinese student citizenship and activities interested scholars worldwide, but discussions around this topic discontinued at the prominent student movements of the 20th century, a peak time for research on Chinese student movement, civic activities, and intellectual life. The academia has not seen sufficient studies, if any, on students' civic life in the 21st century. Part of this void of literature may be explained by the one-party state's indoctrinatory national ideology in political education to restrain the development of everyday citizenship (Zhang & Fagan, 2016), thus resulting in a picture of unity where student dynamics are regarded as neglectable. Under the reinforcement of political stability, student unrest has been largely subsided and phased out on the historical stage. Wright (2012) used “no public political contentiousness” to capture the political dimension of student life in China since the 1989 episode (p. 48).

The continuing marketization strategies and the expansion of higher education in the past decade diminished the formerly elite status of university students and changed university students' perception of their civic identities. To examine the ideological orientation of the current Chinese generation, a survey study of six elite universities in Beijing and Shanghai found the majority of Chinese university students claim themselves to be either apolitical or liberals (Lin, Sun, & Yang, 2015). In another study of citizenship education in China, scholars used “political disengagement” to describe student participation in Chinese universities (Zhang & Fagan, 2016).

The development of digital media in recent years is seen as a rising participatory approach for people to articulate their opinions in public issues. Some scholars tried to explore students' position between the rise of social media as a new platform for social activism and the unprecedented authoritarian state control of speech on the Internet. A study on university students in urban China evinced the unlikelihood of social media use among young citizens in

generating meaningful political participation (Gan, Lee, & Li, 2017). More specifically, Pang (2018a, 2018b) examined the use of social media, Weibo and WeChat in China, and their roles in students' civic and political involvement. According to Pang's two studies respectively, socializing via microblogging only increases students' civic but not political participation (Pang, 2018a); intense WeChat usage is not helpful for individual's internal or external political efficacy (Pang, 2018b).

Global - Local Interactions

This thesis utilizes Friedman's notion of global systemic process (1994) to set up the "base frame" of higher education internationalization. It helps unpack the concept of internationalization as a "glo-calization" process. To make Friedman's theory from cultural anthropology more applicable and sensitive to social transformations and educational changes, I take a closer look from within the institutions. Organizational culture is highlighted as a defining feature to shape student dynamics on university campuses. Changes in organizational governance and administration in current Chinese universities is introduced as a descriptive institutional context for the examination of student engagement.

The Global Systemic Process.

Friedman's proposition of *Global Systemic Process* (1994, p. 2), demonstrated in his book *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, provides an instructive vision of a global system within which cultural process occur. Different from previous studies that discuss globalization itself as a cultural product, the global systemic process allows researchers to examine the social capacities for globalization to occur. By paying attention to the structures, processes and historical continuity, Friedman's (1994) picture of globalization highlights how moving objects and people are "identified, assimilated, marginalized or rejected" in cultural practices (p. 1). He

employed examples of consumption as a means of social reproduction to establish, negotiate, and reinvent cultural identity.

In this study, I argue that education is an important social arena and an integral part of social reproduction. In this sense, education, both as a form of cultural practice and of social production, is subjected to the global systemic process Friedman used to review local-global dynamics. This study is thus grounded in the global systemic process perspective to articulate the interplay between the local and the global in the process of higher education internationalization.

With this lens, this study views higher education internationalization as both a response to globalization and a result of global systemic process. Higher education internationalization is seen as a process and an arena within which cultural practices and strategies take place when the local adopts internationalization strategies and actively interacts with the global. It is a process with two-way interactions that show meaningful inventiveness at the local level. The dialectic of fragmentation/integration in the global systemic process is essential for understanding the formation of internationalized institutional landscapes.

Organizational Culture of the University.

The study of organizational culture has been widely employed in industries but scholars have noted the lack of cultural research in higher education (Tierney, 1988). With stress on the dynamic process of shaping an environment in which activities take place, the organizational culture perspective is inherently consistent with the global systemic process perspective in examining higher education internationalization.

Organizational culture incubates the development of shared norms and meanings. This perspective emphasizes the formation of behavioral norms: it is the “shared values, shared beliefs, shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sense-making” that composes cultural

condition of an organization as a basis for making one's own behavior sensible and meaningful (Morgan, 1997). Student engagement is more than a behavior response but a much more intricate psycho-social process (Kahu, 2013). It is constructed and reconstructed through the meaning-making of their experience, perception and identity from students' interaction with the university (Bryson, 2014, p. 17). Engagement opportunities for students are underlain in the cultural conditions that shape a repertoire or "tool kit" of habits, skills, symbols, worldviews and styles from which students construct "strategies of action" (Swidler, 1986).

University culture defines, among other things, how students interact with their university. In other words, a university's organizational culture and environment influences the connections students have with their institution and shapes how student engagement is manifested. For example, these interactions could be underpinned by authoritarian-paternalistic, democratic-collegiate or managerial-corporate behavior schemata, which sees students as pupils, constituency, or customers (Klemenčič, 2015b). Where students sit in the university's hierarchy of power will influence the engagement activities that they undertake (Carey, 2013). Recently, marketization has challenged the relationship between universities and their students, with the emerging conception of the students as a consumer of an educational product (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Students, being treated as clients of the university, are carefully looked after and pleased, while at the same time depoliticized from reflective and authentic dialogue, which may offer an illusion of partnership or collaboration.

Scholars in the Western context regarded the Chinese university system as the Confucian Model, which is distinctive from where the modern university was incubated in the English-speaking world and Europe (Marginson, 2011). This distinction implies the need to dissect culture as a powerful player in student engagement. One of the defining features in the Chinese

university experience is “administrationalization”. The concept was raised by Chinese scholar to describe the phenomenon of the overly institutionalized administrative hierarchy among employees in Chinese universities and the negative consequences of having the administrative powers rule the university over academic powers (Zhao, 1999). According to Li and Tang (2018), the political, administrative, and academic powers were unbalanced in Chinese universities and created a multi-layer organizational culture system in which university administration was subordinate to the political culture that dominates university campus, and academic culture remained fragile and peripheral in the university system (p. 85).

The issues of administrationalization raised public attention around the same time Chinese universities started to look outward for global competition. Administrationalization was framed as a major barrier for Chinese universities from developing into world-class universities as it has caused infamous problems in Chinese HEIs such as corruption, stagnancy, and lack of academic freedom (He, 2011; H. Li, 2011; Liu, 2013). Discourses of de-administrationalizing Chinese universities were coupled with other centralization forces to address national collective wills, notably the demand to promote institutional status of the Chinese HEIs on a global scale (Ding, Li, & Sun, 2011; Hawkins, 2000; Qian & Verhoeven, 2004). In the tides of internationalization, researchers have highlighted that Chinese HEIs operate in highly institutionalized environments (Shin & Kehm, 2013). Initially influenced coercively by the state imperative for building world-class universities, Chinese elite universities have expressed growing normative and mimetic pressures (Cai, 2010), and are eager to embrace international norms for enhanced legitimacy and technical interdependencies (Vaira, 2004; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This may help Chinese HEIs address historical issues such as managerialist practice to

improve university experience, but it also exposed Chinese HEIs' vulnerability to the danger of prevailing globalist-internationalization.

Conclusion: Theoretical Perspectives of this Study

The purpose of the literature review is to lay out the theoretical dimensions of the research and to frame the key concepts on which this thesis relies. The chapter began by defining the terms of globalization versus internationalization in higher education and the collective, nation-building approach in the pursuit of Chinese higher education internationalization. The next section unpacked the diverse concepts relevant to student engagement. Based on Kuh's national survey (2003) and practice recommendations for American HEIs, student engagement emphasized the merits of desirable behavioral outcomes. The limitations, such as its cross-cultural adaptability, and the under-theorized nature of the student development framework prompted others to work on student self-authorship and agency. R. Zhang's (2009) idea of spaces of action also provided an example for the study. The paucity of and biases in literature on student engagement with institutional governance in particular to the Chinese context highlighted the challenges in situating this study. Implications of student engagement with the administrative institution in citizenship development as a political dimension in student engagement was often overlooked, but important to the understanding of the Chinese experience. The third section reviewed the dynamics of global-local interactions in shaping institutional consequences. Friedman's global systemic process (1994) justified this study's perspective in viewing internationalization as a response to globalization, highlighting the local socio-cultural capacity. The organizational culture lens invited an empirical investigation of the invisible cultural schemas perceived by the participants.

Definition of Terms

Frequently used terms are defined below to specify their meanings in this thesis:

Internationalization refers to “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 3)

Globalization is defined as “the reality shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy ... forces beyond the control of academic institutions” (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009, p. 7)

University governance is the decision and policy making processes in a university regarding how it operates.

Campus public affairs is defined by participant narrative as the governable matters of a university (Interview notes).

University administration represents the university authority in China. It refers to the operation of the university in its administrative system that usually involves multiple levels of administrators.

Student engagement is “[the purposeful] interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions” (Trowler, 2010, p. 3).

Student involvement and **student participation** referred to a factual, static status. In this thesis they mean “the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy students invest in their university experience” (Austin, 1984). The two phrases were interchangeable with student engagement when the intentionality of involvement or participation was absent and unidentifiable.

Student agency is “students’ will, the agentic possibilities, and power, the agentic orientation” (Klemenčič, 2015a, p. 16).

Student self-authorship is “the internal capacity to define one’s belief system, identity and the relationships” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269).

Student cadres are student volunteers for on-campus student organizations and student leadership positions created by the institution.

Student counsellors are “an immediate tie with students, a first-contact departmental administrator in the university system” (R. Zhang, 2009, p. 111).

Laoshi is a Chinese phrase “used by students as an honorific form of addressing academic and administrative personnel” (Tsimonis, 2018, p. 181).

WeChat is China’s biggest mobile messaging application and a social media platform intensively used by university students. It has a combination of similar features of Facebook newsfeed, Instagram photo sharing, and Messenger communication tools.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Approach and Rationale

The objective of the research is to understand student engagement with university governance in China. University students are not only recipients of higher education through formal in-class curriculum, they are also participants and actors of institutional policies. The student voice is essential for an authentic understanding of the student engagement dynamics in Chinese universities. Focusing on their experiences and perceptions, qualitative methodology is the best suited approach for the research project. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is especially useful when a new phenomenon needs to be explored and understood because little research has been done on it, and existing theories do not apply to a particular case under study. In the context of this study, the paucity in current scholarship also calls for a qualitative study that explores the complexities of Chinese student life outside of the university classroom and the students' potential in shaping China's educational future. This study is grounded in an interpretivist perspective and employs qualitative methods to unpack knowledge construction, referential framework, and the constant negotiation in place and space (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Smith, 2005).

For this research, qualitative case study was a chosen approach. Lodico, Spaulding and Voegele (2010) advocated for the use of case study to gain insight and/or understanding of an individual, situation, group or process. The key defining characteristic of a case study is that this approach involves the exploration of a "bounded system" (Schram, 2006). This thesis aligns with Merriam's (1998) approach to case study that specifies a phenomenon and boundaries to form a

bounded system as a case for study. The process examined in this study was a specific kind of student engagement that saw student interaction with university governance.

The Choice of Research Site: East China Normal University

East China Normal University (ECNU) was founded in Shanghai in October 1951 on the legacy of Great China University, Kwang Hua University, and St. John's College of the 1920s. As one of the most prestigious universities in China, it is sponsored by the national "211" and "985" projects in which the state allocates significant resources and financial support for the development of elite universities to lead Chinese higher education. The word "normal" in university names was born with the French Revolution when Ecole Normale Supérieure opened to recruit prospective teachers (Hayhoe et al., 2012). ECNU was established two years after the founding of the People's Republic of China as the first teacher education university to train prospective educators urgently needed under the new regime. It was recognized as one of 16 flagship universities by the state in 1959 to formally claim its status as an elite university in China. A number of studies have taken place at ECNU for its rich local contexts and representation of the nation's first tier university that serves directly under the state. Li and Yang (2014) also selected ECNU to study governance reforms in Chinese HEIs for the three following traits: institutional changes steered by national policies, program diversity and elite reputation with national and global significance, and its relationship with the state during substantial internal and external reforms. These characteristics will also benefit this study on student engagement with institutional governance.

Since the beginning of Opening-up and Reforms in 1978, ECNU was engineered to expand and develop into a comprehensive research university to meet world-class standards across a range of disciplines while keeping its specialization in teacher education at its core.

Previous studies of ECNU's developmental trajectory suggested that it had an enrollment of 5,318 undergraduate students and 1,088 graduate students in 1990 (Hayhoe et al., 2012). By 2019, according to its most recent public statistics, the enrollment has reached 14,362 for undergraduate programs, nearly three times in size, and 20,384 for graduate programs respectively, an increase to almost 20 times its original size to boost the institution's academic productivity (ECNU, 2019). The march towards mass higher education induced the creation of its vast, new suburban campus in Minhang, Shanghai, where most degree students are housed today, and where most participants from this thesis project were from. As a former student of the ECNU Minhang campus, the investigator of this study is well-placed to observe the institutional changes that took place with access to relevant documents and participants for interview.

In addition, ECNU is an ideal site for examining the meaning of internationalization and its impact on the day-to-day experience students. Hayhoe, Yang, and Li (2012) mentioned its recent development of international collaborations at ECNU, including exchange programs, collaborative degrees, more than 100 courses offered in English, and the outreach of Confucius Institute programs overseas. The notable efforts ECNU put in internationalization was directly reflected in 2017 Times Higher Education (THE) Asia University Ranking for "international outlook". ECNU was among the top five most international universities in China, and the most international campus in Shanghai, beating the prestigious Fudan and Shanghai Jiaotong Universities in this regard (THE, 2017). As THE evaluation factored in international student and faculty ratio, teaching and research partnership as scale of measurement, ECNU's recent projects, for instance, the launch of Shanghai NYU, ECNU- the ENS Group (France), Asia Europe Business School, ECNU- U Haifa (Israel) research center, ECNU "future teacher" exchange program, and international culture festivals, were interpreted positively for its

institutional level of internationalization. These data suggested a promising international outlook, but they could easily lead to a ranking trap: how accurate are the numbers in alignment with students' reception of the education provided? How exactly do the university internationalization initiatives benefit students? What are the on-the-ground student experiences of their "international campus"? In particular, how do the intensifying international interactions impact student life, learning, and engagement with their university beyond the immediate scope of such international projects? ECNU is well suited for an examination of the implications of internationalization for students in Chinese universities.

Data Collection

Interviews.

This study considered interview as a key component of research. In line with Merriam's (1998) approach to case study, great emphasis was placed on interview for data gathering among the three major qualitative sources used for this research: document, interview, and observation (Yazan, 2015).

Participant Selection and Recruitment.

The target population for this study was a sample of undergraduate full-time students or recent graduates at ECNU. This included students who were familiar with university life, and those who had abundant experience and thoughts about their university encounters. All participants were recruited with the help of ECNU alumni and current student leaders at the university. They helped to pass an "email recruitment letter" to students to elicit interested individuals. Participants were contacted first via email which outlines the scope of this study and the voluntary nature of the process. The email recruitment script is presented in Appendix C. A consent form was also attached to the recruitment email which highlighted the nature of the

research and how participants' views would be utilized. A first round of five participants were recruited. From there, a snowballing technique was used to identify knowledgeable informants to develop the participant pool. Information for this study were again passed on to potential secondary participants by the initial participants so that interested individuals could contact the investigator to initiate a conversation.

In the recruitment process, participants were not restricted based on age, gender, ethnicity, academic standing or year of school. This study aimed to include participants across campus who shared various characteristics of engagement. Three groups were loosely defined to serve solely as a guideline for recruitment: 1) actively engaged (both positively or negatively) students in university decision-making activities, such as student union leaders, individual activists; 2) student who were disinterested or passively involved in university governance; 3) students who detached themselves from university governance with a cynical stance. This grouping was not a tool for classification but an effort to confront a potential bias in sampling as some students may be easier to identify or more willing to respond than others. In order to achieve the sampling goals to present diverse student voices, adjustments were made during the investigation to attract certain participants. For example, some initial participants were asked to recommend secondary participants that may share certain traits or were involved in high-impact activities. The challenge of attracting students that tended to be unnoticed due to their minimal involvement and low-key presence on campus addressed in the sampling process.

It is worth mentioning that as the meanings and manifestation of student engagement with university governance was one of the research questions of this study, the markers or proxies to indicate the levels and nature of the student engagement were unclear at the beginning of this research. Additionally, students' meaning-making and their actions are not essentially

linear, but with profuse complexities. The understanding of these complexities was important during the sampling process which remained flexible during the investigation.

Interview Procedures and Questions.

Participants of this study were interviewed using a semi-structured, face-to-face or over-the-phone technique. The interviews took approximately 60-90 minutes in duration on the phone or in person (on campus), at the choice of the participants. A list of interview questions was organized into five clusters: general student life, student engagement with extra-curricular activities, student knowledge and participation of university governance, student grievances and handling, student meaningful experience and reflections, as presented in Appendix B. The clustered questions served as the guidelines to give participants maximum freedom to identify relevant content yet still maintain a focus effective for eliciting information about student characteristics, experiences, and personal interpretations. The interviews were delivered as “guided conversations rather than structured queries” as investigator responded to and then asked further questions about what they hear from the participants rather than relying on predetermined questions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 123). Most of the time, participants were not asked the exact questions listed, but individually designed questions based on their experience and backgrounds. When multiple participants were involved in same incidents, specific questions were asked to pay extra attention to the interpretive perspectives between different participants.

The interview also served as a learning experience to invite participants to explore their assumptions about their knowledge, purposes, meanings, boundaries, and their relationship with others. The interview was unfolded *in situ* for a natural conversational flow that would allow participants to fully present their conceptual framework and meaning-making process (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). Participants were provided with an opportunity to process their

experiences in conversations that enable them to understand with more depth their position in the university system and in their own educational journey. Special attention was given to participants' narrative of struggles and conflicts when they were challenged by institutional setting. According to Baxter Magolda and King (2007), contents that included problems, confusion, anger, or anxiety, were productive for accessing participants' self-referential material underlying such experiences. This approach to interview questions lined up with Pizzolato (2005)'s approach to self-authorship that saw dissonance as an opportunity for developing a new, more complex cognitive structure that is crucial to young adults.

Participant Demographics.

A total of ten Chinese student participants were recruited for this study. Table 1 below summarizes basic demographic participant information. As per sampling strategy, gender proportion was not intentionally corrected. Among the ten participants of this study, only one student was male. This was a truthful reflection of the wider ECNU student demographics. Previous studies conducted with ECNU students, such as Hayhoe et al. (2012), also presented the dominance of female students on ECNU campus when their ten-student focus group found only two males.

In this study, participants attended undergraduate programs in different faculties including foreign languages, social development, science, education, communications, finance and statistics, and public administration. The participants were in the second, third, fourth and fifth year of their undergraduate studies. Most participants were 3rd-year undergraduate students. Two of the participants graduated within one year by the time of interview. In terms of international experience, seven out of the ten participants had some sort of international study

experience. The percentage was higher than that of the entire average rate of students at ECNU who took international component in their study.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participants	Year of University	Area of study	Gender	With international study experience?
A	Recent graduate	Social Work	M	No
B	Recent graduate	Chemistry	F	Yes- U.K.
C	5 th year	Physics Education	F	Yes- U.S.
D	4 th year	Sociology	F	No
E	3 rd year	Journalism	F	Yes- Canada
F	2 nd year	English	F	No
G	3 rd year	Human Resources	F	Yes- Canada
H	3 rd year	Advertising	F	Yes- Canada
I	4 th year	Spanish	F	Yes- Chile
J	3 rd year	Finance	F	Yes- Canada

Note. Compiled by the author from interview notes.

Textual Materials.

Multiple sources of textual materials were used for this study. Policy documents, information on websites, and public social media articles and posts were collected for this study. For instance, MOE and State Council's policy documents on the improvement of Chinese higher education, ECNU's description of its recent reforms in their open communication with students, and students' comments online under posts of university news were useful texts for this study. Some texts were accessed through online sources and library archives, others were from fieldwork collections such as bulletin board posters to recruit student officers. Field notes were taken in the fieldwork of this study. Observations on campus relating to student engagement with

institutional governance, for example, the layout of student leadership offices in the university center, the setup of the reception desk for food complaints in the canteen, and campus geography including student housing arrangements were journaled to diversify and triangulate data sources.

A variety of textual materials were used before, during, and after interviews. Before interviews, these textual materials provided a discourse overview of university governance and student engagement at ECNU, and a sense of student attitudes reflected on (social) media. It helped interviewee to set expectations for a set of incidences that concerned students in general, therefore specific questions were prepared to hear different student perspectives on a mutually experienced incident. After interviews, another comprehensive review of public and internal documents was conducted to examine facts, make connections between participant responses and administrative discourses. This simultaneous textual analysis process supplemented the main instrument of interview to triangulate evidence for themes emerging from this research.

Challenges and Solutions.

Two major challenges arose in the interview process: sampling and linguistic barriers.

During the first half of the investigation, it became apparent that only a certain type of participants responded to the request for interview. Students who were enthusiastic about student leadership or student voices in university governance were more likely to respond to this research and be comfortable sharing their experiences. However, students with low-key presence were still largely invisible and their minimal campus involvement was under-investigated. Noticing that the sampling might risk neglecting these students who potentially made up a huge proportion of the entire student population, adjustments were made to meet this challenge. To ensure the validity of the data collected and present a more holistic picture of student experience with a variety of engagement on campus at different levels, a monetary incentive of 50 RMB

(about CAD \$10) was introduced for all participants. This was a small enough amount to avoid unduly influencing a participant to take part or to remain in this study while acknowledging the contribution of prospective participants.

Qualitative research seeks to explore meanings in subjective experiences largely constructed by the use of language. The interviews were conducted in participants' native language, Chinese Mandarin, a language drastically different from the reporting language, English. The use of translation in research could disrupt the fluid process and has the potential risk of altering the original use and, sometimes, the structure of the participant's use of language (Squires, 2009). With even bilingual speakers, the investigation was not unproblematic when key words of the interview questions did not have compatible translations in the Chinese language.

Before interviewing recruited participants, there were trial runs to test if the question could be delivered successfully in Chinese. During the test, a direct literal translation of "governance" was used as *zhili* to approach a volunteer Chinese-speaking student. Feedback about the trial interview showed the inefficiency in communicating between the investigator and the interviewee because the contextual meaning of *zhili* in Chinese deviated from the focus of this study. To draw findings truly reflective of the participants, this study adopted meaning-based translations rather than word-for-word translations (Jaeyoung, Kushner, Mill, & Lai, 2012).

Additionally, students showed unfamiliarity and a lack of clarity for the terminology of governance, regardless of accurate translations. Some students confused governance in Chinese universities with (campus) security, politics, and directives. The confusion around the term "governance" was no longer an issue of finding the best translation, but more about locating its contextual meanings for the participants. The interviews acknowledged that narratives were contextualized and that reframing questions in participants' context could lead to greater

expression for cross-cultural understanding (Sidhu et al., 2016). When providing participants with several alternate phrases that share similar connotation, such as institution management, decision-making process, public/campus affairs or student affairs, participants showed a common preference towards using “campus public affairs” (*xiaoyuan gonggong shiwu*) as a key word for discussion. The same applied to other terminologies such as “process”, a commonly used word in English-written policies and at English-speaking workplaces; however, most participants found the direct literal translation of this term difficult to comprehend without further explanation. The interviews thus showed flexibility in using terminologies and providing clarifications rather than sticking with the English terms or turning conversation into a teaching session where students were forced to learn and use unfamiliar jargons. This strategy enabled them to effectively contribute their knowledge.

Therefore, throughout the interviews, a list of synonyms and examples for research key words were prepared. If students had a preferred self-identified term to describe their experience, their phrases would be adopted during the interviews. When reporting findings, contextual meanings were checked for most productive translations, thus translations may vary slightly for the same word they use to present necessary nuances. A final check-in procedure was also added to the end of each interview when participants were asked again about their understanding of the key words used (such as “governance”). Around half participants reported a more holistic understanding at the end by adding new layers of information or correcting their early answers.

It is important to say that even with the considerations and adjustments above, linguistic issues inevitably persisted in various forms throughout the interview. During the interview, meaning check was frequent as investigator asked for clarification and reconfirmation of meanings delivered whenever it was unclear. These challenges were seen as valuable lessons to

fill the knowledge gap in the field being studied. While some scholars have highlighted the importance of addressing language barriers in qualitative studies, it is unfortunate that epistemological and methodological issues around conducting research across cultures and languages, especially from non-English data to English reporting, were seldom discussed and largely neglected in social science research other than the area of additional language learning (Jaeyoung et al., 2012; Temple & Young, 2004).

Data Analysis

Merriam (1988) argued that data collection and data analysis must be a simultaneous process in a qualitative research (as cited in Creswell, 2003, p. 203). In this study, data analysis was an ongoing process involving continual reflection about data and new strategies for further data collection. The interview data analysis started when the investigator transcribed interview recordings and generated a note of highlights following each interview. Next, a close reading of the transcripts in one sitting allowed for a coherent understanding of the material as a whole. Research notes with observations of patterns and differentiations were added to the interview data. At this stage, the investigator's reflection on the overall meaning of the data prompted the coding according to the unit of analysis. After that, meaningful chunks of information were grouped into descriptive codes. This coding technique also took frequency of mention, specificity of detail, intensity of emotion, and correction or confliction of responses into consideration. Similar to Suderman's (2015) study of UBC international undergraduate student engagement, this study found participant responses fell into three aspects: actions and events, feelings and reflections, and underlying factors that decided the campus conditions to enables or constrain student actions (p.110). Following coding, thematical analysis was conducted to examine major findings arose from each theme and to process the relations among these themes.

Table 2**Illustrating Analytical Framework and Research Themes**

Research Questions	Unit of Analysis	Key Themes
<p>Q1: How are Chinese students engaged in the university governing system?</p> <p>Q2: How do students interact with their institution in decision-making processes?</p>	<p>Student-university interaction in governance</p>	<p>Formal engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ineffectiveness of student unions and associations - Student cadres as leadership in student organizations - New institutional venues to engage students <p>Informal engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student initiation for interactions - Use of resources: human, digital, creativity - Less university gaze, censorship

<p>Q3: Where are the tensions, spaces of action, and negotiation, and why do they exist?</p> <p>Q4: How do students perceive and reflect on their activities, directly or broadly in relation to university governance?</p>	<p>Students' framing of their experiences</p>	<p>Feelings and Reflections</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A call for progressive campus: governance transparency and gender equality - Tactics and strategies to challenge boundaries - Acceptance of low-impact participation - Persisting hope for engagement
<p>Q5: How is power manifested in the governing process at an elite research university in China?</p> <p>Q6: How do globalized neoliberal practices and the local social reality of China interact and shape the internationalization of the university?</p>	<p>Rationales of power and external impacts</p>	<p>Deciding Factors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CYL as institutional leadership in student activities - Dominance of political culture - Inconsistent borrowing of international modes - Collective approach to internationalization/internationalization for global competition

The final step was interpretation of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). These findings were analyzed and discussed based on an integrated set of theoretical frameworks proposed in the literature review. As students' development of subjective meanings of their educational experiences were negotiated socially, culturally, historically, and cannot be understood apart from institutional contexts, an interpretive and constructivist approach was utilized to understand meaning-making and knowledge construction in this study. According to Merriam (1998), there were two lines of interpretation in qualitative study: in the case when

researcher constructed a reality to the research situation that interacted with people's interpretations of the phenomenon being studied, and in the final product of interpretation by the researcher (p. 22, as cited in Yazan, 2015).

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval by the Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) at the University of Victoria on June 1st, 2018 (protocol number: 17-157, see Appendix A).

First, as the investigator used to work as a student affairs paraprofessional at ECNU, there was established collegial rapport between the investigator and the research site that facilitated the participant recruitment process; but there was no power shadowing or personal relationship between the investigator and the student participants that might cause conflicts of interest. Second, cultural preference was respected in this cross-cultural project. To ensure the ethical research guidelines were followed, consent was gathered by the investigator and explicitly given by the participants before the research started. Understanding that within China, ethics in research practice was not systematically implemented and thus participants could feel nervous about signing an unfamiliar document. Options for verbal or written consent was provided. The introduction of consent also allowed the investigator to walk the participants through the voluntary nature of participation, free withdrawal, and protocols to protect their rights and privacy. Third, for anonymity, names or pseudonyms were not used in the report of results. All quotes in this thesis were cited as "interview notes" to disguise participant identity.

Trustworthiness of this Study

A qualitative data analysis is a process of making sense of the data. As this research was designed in line with Merriam's (1998) approach to case study, it also embraced the idea that this study is one accurate and trustworthy presentation of multiple interpretations of the reality. To

ensure trustworthiness of interpretation, analysis and conclusions, two main strategies were used: triangulation and the disclosure of researcher's bias.

In this research, I triangulated the data through multiple sources. The use of textual materials supplemented the interview responses for a more coherent understanding of the themes. Triangulation was also used in this study for interviews. When the same incident was talked about by various participants, personal perspectives were respected while the facts were also cross-checked to triangulate evidence. By considering several sources of data or perspectives from participants this process supported the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2018, p. 200).

Reflexivity is a core characteristic of qualitative research. It is essential in reducing a personal bias in data collection, analysis and interpretation. To ensure trustworthiness of research and reduce inaccuracy caused by researcher's bias, I kept a research diary and field notes throughout the entire research process and analysis. The research diary was kept to document the processes during the research design, in order to be reflexive and aware of potentially overlooked bias in the field. The field notes were regularly reviewed and updated to ensure accuracy during interviews, document analysis, and observations. Interview highlights and observations from the physical environment were documented in a timely fashion. Another merit of these detailed notes was that they provided thick descriptions to make some of the research scenes more realistic and vivid.

Limitations of this Study

The analysis and conclusion of this thesis should be considered in relation to the following limitations:

First, the sample size of this study was small to support the depth of case-oriented analysis that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry (Sandelowski, 1996, as cited in Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Yong, 2018). Ten undergraduate students were selected as participants from a single university campus of ECNU. Assertions in this study were supported by the richly-textured interpretations based on these participants' feedback and sources gathered during fieldwork. The feedback from participants, while informative for the investigation, was limited by the small size to fully reflect the entire student body in this university, or in China more generally.

Second, there are more than two thousand HEIs, including one thousand universities and over one hundred elite universities in China today. Limited by the sampling numbers and the type of university selected, this case study will inform the current trends of student governance engagement and the internationalization in elite Chinese universities, but findings may not be generalizable beyond this scope. There is some confidence, however, that general characteristics of the power relations highlighted in this study apply across the Chinese higher education sector. Although the precise outcomes may play out differently in local institutions, the findings described in this thesis appear to be consistent with the array of findings from other research sources cited.

Third, this study should be seen as a snapshot of university student engagement in contemporary China. The objective was to explore the complexity of student governance engagement in the Chinese context and to probe the influences of internationalization on contemporary Chinese campuses. Similar to many other studies of the contemporary Chinese society, the research findings described in this thesis have to be “understood within the context of a country in a state of flux” (Yang, Vidovich, & Currie, 2007). While the scope of this study

was limited to the Chinese context, the intention has been to stimulate a cross-cultural examination of higher education phenomena to help shape a critical international comparative understanding. Future research will be needed to continue the conversations started here in greater depth and in more diverse contexts.

Chapter 4

Findings

This thesis asked three main questions: What are the patterns of student-university interaction in the area of governance? What are the ways in which students frame questions, concerns, and observations? How do power and external influences affect student experiences? To answer these questions, six concrete subquestions were proposed.

This chapter will respond directly to the first five research questions. The first two subquestions explored how students were engaged by the university in its governance system and how they interacted with their university in decision-making. The third and fourth subquestions referred to where tensions and spaces of action lay as demonstrated in student actions and reflections. The fifth subquestion asked to dissect the overarching power relations, an invisible yet powerful hand in student engagement from the issues observed in previous questions. Answers to the first five questions revealed emerging tensions between the political priority in student affairs to reinforce the hierachal order and the tacit spaces of action students identified to push administrative boundaries. Students also displayed a faint but persistent hope to seek more meaningful, vibrant, and authentic student engagement in university governance.

The sixth subquestion asked for a comprehensive overview: How do globalized practices and the local social reality of China interact and shape the internationalization of the university? It aims to conclude this research and thus can only be answered after the characteristics of global and local influences are highlighted through the presentation of student engagement dynamics. These findings prepare for a rich and accurate understanding of internationalization in Chinese HEIs at the end of this thesis.

Student Engagement Activities

The idea of “governance” was unclear for participants as discussed in the methodology chapter. This challenge was itself a major finding of this study as it led to further questions: was it merely linguistic? Difficulties in direct translation is often a result as the multiplicity of the layers of meanings one word refers to in one culture cannot be captured in one single word in another culture. The investigation process used participants’ choice of phrases, such as institution management, decision-making process, student affairs, and campus public affairs for more relevant and effective communication on the matter of discussion.

Participants reported that they were engaged in formal and informal interactions with the university through a variety of venues and activities. Table 3 provided an overview of approaches of engagement by its level of institutionalization.

Table 3
Venues for Student Engagement at ECNU

Direct		Indirect	
Official	University efforts	Student efforts	Unofficial
Formal			Informal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President lunch meetings • Student assistant presidents • Student consultative council • Student unions and associations • President’s mailbox • University surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student clubs (Voice Group, Commune of Sphericity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public opinion pressure • Social media • Interaction with university staff and faculty 	

Note. Compiled by the author from interview notes.

This may not be an exhaustive list for student engagement at ECNU and possibly differed from an institutional chart for student engagement in governance; however, it is important for further discussion to develop based on this student understanding of their choices in the governing process. The level of institutionalization signaled a formal process in which students were acknowledged and invited in the university system, and at the same time, subjected to university scrutiny and regulation. More student-led than institution-led activities were found in spaces with relatively more autonomy and conflicts. While the recent flourishing of highly institutionalized venues showed Chinese university's attempt to address student voices in university operations, this study also paid attention to the activities with lower levels of institutionalization as these areas were potentially more productive spaces of student actions with an indication of their beliefs and agency on university campus.

In the following sections, three highly institutionalized venues are examined to show the institution's efforts to regulate student engagement in university system and reinforce the authoritarian hierarchy. In comparison, students' informal engagement was more diverse and creative. Participants reported interactions with low-ranking professional employees, namely student counsellors and new professors in this study, to navigate their grievances in university governance. The story of the Onion also demonstrated students' ability to take advantage of the university gaze and interact with the administration in the virtual space of Internet.

Formal Engagement.

The democratic management of the university involving student participation has long been encouraged by the Chinese MOE and written in its mandate (Minstry of Education, 1990) as "students' critiques and suggestions to school authority shall be encouraged, and their

participation into school democratic management shall be supported” (Article 50). The participants in this study reported their heavy reliance on institutional appointment to engage with institutional governance at ECNU. Students were invited to engage in extra-curricular activities and governance processes through a number of institutional student leadership positions. Student union was an historical legacy of student government which has turned into an institutionalized sector of the university since 1990s. Participants reported a series of new initiatives implemented by the university since around 2014 to engage students in campus public affairs. The three most frequently mentioned were President Lunch Meetings, Student Assistant Presidents, and the Student Consultative Council. While some of the venues showed prevalent international influences, they did not essentially change the existing university system as these venues were operated in ways that reinforced the university’s control and supervision over its students.

Clarify Student Leadership in China.

The idea of student leadership in Chinese universities strikes a difference from that of the Western context. Student leaders in China referred primarily to a specific group of student cadres (*xuesheng ganbu*) who worked voluntarily at leadership position created by their HEIs. In this thesis, student cadres are defined as students who work voluntarily for on-campus student organizations, including class committees, student unions and associations, student clubs, and all other positions created by the university’s Student Work (*xuegong*) system and/or controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)/Communist Youth League (CYL). As these positions were usually created as student leadership opportunities, students who rose from entry level positions to managerial roles in the hierarchical student cadre system were regarded as student leaders in this thesis. This progressive screening and selection process required a lot of personal

commitment, yet through the *rite de passage*, students were publicly recognized as being part of a special elite (Doyon, 2017).

With this definition of student cadres, it became apparent that they were an important group to investigate the student engagement with university governance, particularly in formal student organizations. In fact, most participants reported their student cadre experience, whether or not they stayed to compete for student leader positions. In Chinese universities, student cadres did not have their leadership endorsed by the students they served. Instead, the source of their power came from the delegation of the university leadership, usually represented by the Committee of Communist Youth League (CCYL). Student leadership appointment, evaluation, and awards were processed by the university administration through its bureaucratic system. It removed the inherent positional power from the student leadership positions and carefully delegated power to student cadres on behalf of the institution, thus refraining student leaders from challenging the university administration.

The university kept student cadres loyal to them. In a Chinese university structure, administrators and faculty members counted heavily on student cadres to carry out administrative tasks, facilitate communication, implement policies, and mirror a politically positive student leadership. As the “kingpin of the Maoist education system”, student cadres enjoyed their perks on campus such as a facilitated access to university resources including grants and/or privileged access to other information about opportunities that would benefit their personal academic or career development (Doyon, 2017, p. 190). Favoritism towards student leaders over other students was justified both formally and informally in the university system and among industrial employers. Interviews suggested that the rapport student leaders formed with university employees in their day-to-day work was one of the most valuable outcomes for their

commitments as it gave a student an edge in competitions. Faced with enormous benefits, most student leaders maintained cooperation throughout their service and other engagement with university governance.

Student Unions Redefined.

This study found the effectiveness of student union in terms of engaging students with institutional governance particularly concerning. The contextual meaning of student union in China should be distinguished from that of the West. While the word “union” may carry a political connotation in the Western world referring to a self-organized collective action, student union has grown far away from student government in China. Student unions in Chinese universities worked closer to the idea of student societies but as a service division supervised by university governing bodies, notably the CCP and CYL. Their main job was to assist the university to implement student-related policies rather than advocating for the students. Its political task was to maintain its apolitical nature in daily operation. Through activity censorship and the incorporation of student cadres, student union was widely considered an institutional apparatus and bureaucratic organ of the university to regulate student life. Its organizational culture for student representation or student governance was not comparable to its counterparts on Western democratic campuses.

“Under the leadership of the party committee” and “guided by the Youth League Committee” were the conditions for a Chinese student union to be a student-run organization. In accordance with the latest National Student Association Constitution, student union was defined as an executive committee elected by the Student Congress (L. L, 2017). Supposedly, Student Congress was a student representative system that host its annual meeting to examine university policies pertaining to student life, including important student leadership appointments; for the

rest of the year, it would remain a venue for students to freely air their concerns about university operation. However, as systematic as it appeared on paper, it was unclear in practice how this system works and most participants believed that the congress was merely symbolic.

None of the participants in this study regarded student union as a productive venue for governance involvement. Although the origin of the student unions in China can be dated back to the Republican period when they actively participated in social activism as student governments in the historical waves of revolution, they have changed over time. Since the Student Movement of 1989, stability control on university campuses became paramount for the Chinese state. The university student unions' reach and influence in the governing process has been greatly marginalized in the university system. According to the mission statement of the ECNU Student Union, its main function was to facilitate communication between the school management board and its students, and organize various events and activities to enrich student life: these aspects did not entail the representation or engagement of students in university governance (ECNU Student Union, n.d.). In line with the mission statement of ECNU Student Union, participants considered student union's primary duty as either "event host" or "errands runner" to fulfill the administrative needs of the university (Interview notes).

Seven participants strongly disagreed with any statements that suggested student unions had any impact on university governance. They believed that student union was merely an organizer of fun events but not at all an advocate for student voice. The other three participants believed that student union played only a passive, indirect role in university governance. They recognized that the possibility of indirect impact on university governance was created by meeting the "teachers" with power for change-making. The term teacher (*laoshi*) in the Chinese university context was often adopted by students as an honorific form of addressing professional

academic and administrative personnel, for instance, a professional staff who occupied leading positions in the CCYL or a student counsellor who served as an administrator in the domain of student life (Tsimonis, 2018). The informal connection student cadres built through the interactions took place in student unions would, in this sense, enable students to voice their hopes through a more powerful figure. The core of student engagement with university governance was still relation (*guanxi*) -based instead of process-driven, as participants described, “an ultimate insider game” (Interview notes).

Unsurprisingly, high level of bureaucracy and hierarchy was reported by all participants as a key characteristic of ECNU’s student unions. As bureaucracy deterred newcomers, the insider circle remained stable. Participants described that engaged students showed a strong sense of involvement and group cohesiveness, but student who were outsiders displayed cynical attitudes (Interview notes). The portrait of student unions showed an elitist culture among student leaders as student unions have become increasingly exclusive for “personal glamour” according to some of the participants (Interview notes). The student leadership opportunities became a rite of passage for those to distinguish themselves from their peers and graduate with competitive honorary titles on their resume. Interestingly, this concern was not unique to Chinese universities, but also shared by North American universities. When former president of University of British Colombia’s Science Undergraduate Society publicly criticized the “cliqueyness” of the society, vigorous responses were triggered (Nguyen, 2018). Although the way university student unions function differs drastically from China to Canada, they both presented the issues of exclusiveness and the trend to use these platforms for personal achievements rather than addressing collective needs. Universities, whether carrying with a political priority to domesticate students or a democratic agenda to engage students, were seen

allowing student unions and societies to become an institutionalized battlefield for student competition, eventually weakening its ability for collective action.

Consulting at President's Lunch Meetings.

Participants believed that in the Chinese society the most effective way of problem-solving was to talk to the man who rules the institution. The President Lunch Meetings (hereafter as PLMs) was a university gesture to show students' opinions were valued. With free decent lunch boxes provided, the PLMs invited students to a conversation with the university leadership. In order to increase publicity, these events also needed a correspondent (usually assigned to a student cadre or counsellor) standing by to collect media materials such as pictures and conversation notes. At times, the setting of the meetings resembled a press conference where the authority took questions and released information. The PLMs were highly formal, depicted by participants as "feeling ceremonial" (Interview notes). Among those participants who participated in this setting, they found the experience at times uncomfortable:

Students are so nervous and reserved. I saw many of them looking at the chicken drumsticks in their lunch boxes but do not dare to eat (because it may look messy). (Interview notes)

Feedback from interviewed participants suggested that students generally lacked the enthusiasm to participate. Although the PLM was most mentioned as an approach for student governance engagement; only half participants had experiences of this venue. The PLMs usually had seats for 5-12 students, but attendance was often unsatisfactory. To avoid embarrassing higher-up university leaders with an empty lunch room, some students were asked to attend PLMs as a mandatory session. When inadequate sign-ups happened, a common practice of "assigned participation" were employed by student counsellors. Because of the binding contract student cadres have with the university administration, the power of student counsellor was

apparently more influential over those who work closely under them than other students. As a result, student cadres were summoned the most and they gradually became the “frequent flyers” of these events.

In time, a considerable number of students regarded such events to be exclusive of them instead of their game-changer, and those who without student leadership appointment silently dropped out of events that intimidated them with such cliquishness. This led to an information gap and contributed to the misuse or abuse of this communication tool. Some participants viewed PLMs a student cadre mixer, a place to work on one’s networking. Some participants regarded this venue as “no practical use” because they saw students in need eventually drift away from this space and those who stayed were unhelpful to productive communication (Interview notes). Participants assumed the PLMs might have “some merits in personal networking with leadership”, but they were convinced that it was not enough to achieve real changes (Interview notes).

Participants of the study found a common predicament of the PLMs: supposedly it was there to hear challenges and problems in student life and help address them from the university, but the reality suggested that the conversations remained superficial even when attendees talked about deeply problematic phenomena that needed a change. Participants reported difficulty to speak honestly and openly when situated in this meeting environment. They questioned whether the PLMs was truly for problem-solving or merely for the existence of it to check the student engagement box. Participants addressed the applicability and limitations of the PLMs in their own words, but the nature of the issues were best described by one participant with a vivid analogy to illustrate the setup of the PLMs:

They [the leaders] are there to help solve students’ problems under the current framework. The university has drawn a picture. Now

they want to do some highlighting – say they want to add some grass to a picture of natural landscape, so they come to ask you about your preferences of the backyard lawn. They regard this as engaging students (in the process). The problem is they did not ask you when designing the picture: ‘what scenery would you like to see’? It [The PLM] is more like a venue for the university to pass us students their expectations and hear their investment. They explain university policies and talk us into accepting rather than listening to our voices. Many times, they ask questions with the assumption that students should develop towards certain directions – they fix things on that pre-determined path.

(Interview notes)

Participants acknowledged the good efforts of the PLMs; meanwhile, they tried to identify a few reasons why the PLMs did not turn out the way it was intended. All responses pointed to the lack of awareness for public participation. Participants seemed confused by the “egg or chicken” question as if the low enthusiasm and negativity led to the lack of participatory awareness or *vice versa*. The only certainty was that the two elements was inseparable. Most participants were upset that their fellow students were rather indifferent instead of actively seeking involvement in the decision-making process. They described a culture of indifference or negativity about governance engagement. In the meantime, almost all participants were just as indifferent or negative about the events as their fellow students. The situation thus became stagnant. In participant reflections, they believed it was the ruling culture in which students were immersed caused their inability to hold the university accountable. Because the idea of student rights and voices was not truthfully reflected in the administration of the university, institutional venues such as the PLM was unlikely to yield meaningful responses.

Involve Students as “Officers” in University Operation.

According to Carey (2013)’s hierarchical model (Figure 1), the recent efforts in involving student officers in the peripheral governance structure demonstrated ECNU’s commitment to

shift from a responsive institution to a reactive institution. The Student Assistant Presidents (hereafter as SAPs) and the Student Consultative Council (hereafter as SCC) were two examples.

The naming of the two venues above was their official English titles, but it was noticed that they were inaccurate translation to the original Chinese. The SAPs (*xuesheng xiaozhang zhuli*) actually meant student assistants to the president. Similarly, a more fitting translation for the SCC (*xiaoyuan canyi hui*) would be the Student Senate. A possible explanation for this translation issue could be merely poor quality of translation or intentional avoidance. Borrowing the exact English terms and mimicking the practices altogether may pose a challenge to the integrity of the Chinese political system at the university level and jeopardize the university's rapport with the Chinese government. It is important that readers of this thesis understand the relevance of these venues to international contexts, but for the authenticity of presenting findings this thesis uses the names provided by the institution whenever available.

The practice of involving students in the administrative system as paraprofessionals was not new to a Chinese university. Student assistants and paraprofessionals of all kinds could easily be found in the university system. The uniqueness about the new SAP position and the establishment of SCC was that for the first time, enormous efforts were put in promoting public knowledge of the existence of such student position and organization. The university's devotion to creating the image of the student representation to the students at large through active advertisement, was only recent.

The SAP position was created after the PLMs to further facilitate students' contact with the university leadership and to increase the approachability of the leadership faces by having student ambassadors. SAP was a one-year term volunteer position by university appointment. Prior to recruitment, the notice of hiring was posted campus wide to all students. A panel formed

by university administrative leaders performed three rounds of screening to select the first cohort of six student SAPs in 2015 from all applicants. These applicants had a long list of credentials as student cadres. In other words, they were exemplary for their cooperative organizational skills in assisting university authority. Large photos of the newly appointed SAPs and their statements were shown on the LED screens in dining facilities and administration buildings. Simultaneously, posters were put up on the announcement boards campus-wide and social media were posting articles to introduce the establishment of SAP and the successful applicants. A brand-new SAP office was set up on the second floor of the Student Center. Visitors and passers-by to the Student Center would be able to see through the bright windows into this office and take a look at the well-formatted SAP work schedule displayed at the door. Through these efforts, a sense of honor and personal glamor, as well as legitimacy and power, was created for the SAPs, both of which tied them closely to their institutional status.

Student canteen, as a place that has fermented many of the historical student protests in modern China, induced the birth of the SCC. Canteen services was an enduring topic on a Chinese university campus. A movable desk as the reception counter to interact with students was where the formation of the SCC started (What is the Student Consultative Council, n.d.). It was formerly an inactive department within University Student Union re-organized as the current SCC. By nature, it was considered in between of a student-run club and a division of University Student Union. As it was included on the ECNU websites for student leadership by the time of research, this thesis categorizes the SCC as a formal engagement venue.

The emergence of the SCC and the SAP position was both around 2014. This was an important time when major university-wide reforms and infrastructure update had been going on for a few semesters and student request for transparent process and better student services was

growing rapidly as a response. A central goal for SAPs and SCC was to mediate potential grievances or conflicts students had with the university. For SAPs, responding to online surveys and enquiries was an integral part of their job. The weekly WeChat (a predominant social media network in China roughly equivalent to the combination of Facebook and Messenger) posts were written in daily conversational language with great readability and approachability to discuss miscellaneous issues, such as canteen food complaints, facility maintenance, bike parking, etc. Among the existing 30 volumes of the official SAP reports, about half reports revolved around satisfaction level investigation, referring to the use of a specific campus system, process or facility. Compared with SAP, participants reported more frequent use of SCC resources. A key feature of the SCC was a student complaint-oriented WeChat account (ECNU Youth, 2015). Students had access to leave an anonymous complaint through the platform and the student account administrators would interact with students regarding their message within days. The platform allowed message senders to imagine that they were venting to their fellow students on the other side of their phones. From participants' report of use, a common theme in the SCC's service was that the interactions almost always occurred in areas addressing logistical inconvenience in student life outside of serious political or academic domain. The latest updates from participants of this study suggested that the contact point with the SCC team remained in student canteens, and food complaints was still the main face of their work.

Democratic participation was mentioned both at the SAP office and the SCC. The SAP mandate stated the setup of this venue was to bridge the communication between "the ground and the higher up" and to "explore an innovation of democratic governance model on campus" (ECNU SAP Office, 2016). While explicitly using "democratic" to describe the ideal governance mode, it also stated that the positions were supervised by the university. In practice, as much as

the university claimed that they value the SAP's participatory role in mediating university policy and student concerns, the SAPs did not share decision-making power with the university. From the hiring process, the promotion sponsorship, and the university appointment, a strong will of the university was apparent. The major facet of the SAP's work also implied the university's eagerness keep its students pleasant and stable. From participants' description of their experiences with the SAP venue, student voices were treated in a way similar to customer service with a goal to keep clients satisfied with university operation.

Across the ECNU campus, the SCC's slogan read more assertive: "No democracy to imagination" (ECNU Youth League, 2014a). The SCC also adopted an "upper house" and "lower house" structure originated in democratic political systems foreign to China. On paper, the SCC sat in the intersection between an "upper house" composed of "Student Union Presidents of all faculties", and a "lower house" with "a selective group of undergraduate volunteer students" (ECNU Youth League, 2014b). This structure showed an intention to borrow from the well-established student senate mode from Western universities and bring democratic student engagement to Chinese university governance. The practice of operating the SCC in reality deviated from a robust student senate, but the setup enhanced legitimacy for this new student self-regulating organization.

However, both organizations' visions for democratic student engagement was difficult to realize in full. A democratic practice that allows perspectives from different parties to have their voices is incompatible with a dominating university authority that attempts to assimilate its student voices. The establishment of the SAP positions showed a gesture of democratic leadership, but it eventually strengthened the authoritative leadership of the university. The SCC members' dual status, both as student cadres and democracy activist in the Chinese context, was

essentially self-conflicting. By institutionalizing SAP and SCC, the university quickly established a democratic image among students, but at the same time neutralized their potential to check and to balance the governing powers of the university. The two venues provided a space for students to feel validated for their complaints about the insignificant campus issues, but they were also the gatekeeper for overstepping comments.

Informal Engagement.

Through formalizing student interactions, the institutional venues neutralized student voices and minimized their potential to challenge the governing powers. In contrast, informal ways of engagement allowed more flexibility for students to discuss their communal life experience on campus and form potential actions. A myriad of literature has studied the phenomenon of personal networks (*guan xi*) as the dominant form of information and resource exchange in Chinese society (Gold, Gold, Guthrie, & Wank, 2002; Xin & Pearce, 1996). This was true as participants of this study narrated various ways of using informal approaches and resources to initiate their interaction with the university. While most participants reported not seeing much space for engagement at the beginning of interview, they later reflected on their agency and capacity to act in these in-between spaces informally.

Personal Connections as Resources.

In the face of uncertainties, confusion, injustice and grievances, some participants sought help from street-level bureaucrats and low-ranking professors. Student counsellors and teaching professors were most mentioned as the first point of connection for students to further engage with institutional process. Participants of this study were unanimous in their agreement that informal interactions and personal connections were more effective than the institutional process in seeking changes and resolving problems. They regarded human relationships and networks as

an accumulating social capital that was crucial for student actions. Despite the fact that high-ranking administrators were powerful in decision-making, participants still showed preference for street-level administrators and faculty as they provided more dialogue space. It was the openness for a productive conversation, instead of a diplomatic encounter, made it “realistic” for student voices to be heard and acted upon: “The game-changer is the acquaintance network and informal connections you own” (Interview notes).

Students and their counsellors.

The term “counsellor” was a direct translation from Chinese to English for cross-text accuracy. However, the connotation of the title was drastically different from the common understanding in the West where it meant a particular profession that provides individuals with therapeutic mental health support. In a Chinese university, student counsellors were an immediate tie with students, a first-contact departmental administrator in the university system (R. Zhang, 2009, p. 111). In Chinese HEIs, students were strictly administered by their academic units, such as department of mathematics or school of foreign languages. Unlike a division-based professional student services system in Western universities, it was “one counsellor for all” mode in China as they covered nearly every aspect of student life for the student cohort they were assigned to. This included mental health, financial aid and scholarship, basic counseling, activity supervision, career help, and any liaison necessary between students and the university (MOE, 2006).

In real-life practice, the counsellor to student ratio ranged from 1:100 to 1:400. Providing support for and performing supervision over hundreds of students at the same time was never easy. Previous studies examined the confusion and inner conflicts commonly shared among university student counsellors in their daily work caused by the multiplicity of roles and

intensified student-university tensions (Cheng, 2018). Their personal values, beliefs, and understanding of their positions also varied individually. When these factors were combined with their immediate power over students, their approaches could either be a great help or a ruthless suppressive force for students navigating university system.

This study suggests that student counsellors remained a double-edge sword in student engagement with institutional governance. As student counsellors were recruited only among registered CCP members at ECNU, they were expected to serve as discipliners and policy enforcers. In the meantime, as students' immediate social tie on campus situated between university administration and students, they were reported to occasionally serve as "cultural brokers or on-the-ground negotiators between universal rules and reasonableness" (R. Zhang, 2009, p. 118). This study found two incidents from participants' interviews that supported both directions: in the first incident students onboarded their counsellor to be their champion; in the second incident a student action was impeded by their counsellor.

The first example was a student success in revoking a building relocation decision in which a student counsellor was actively involved to facilitate conversation and negotiation. An academic department was required to relocate to the university's suburban campus from its at-the-time downtown campus. As soon as the announcement was made at a student congregation, a petition to protest against the decision was immediately initiated and quickly gathered considerable student signatures. Bottom-up mobilization against a made decision was a sensitive move in the Chinese context. The department student counsellor chose to schedule a meeting for students to speak with the department CCP committee secretary, the administrative person of contact for university decisions. A participant of this study sat-in on that meeting and narrated the experience as it was emotionally challenging when the school authority insisted students

should overcome inconveniences at their own cost for the greater good of the university. Feeling that student interest was neglected in university planning, the participant and her fellow students were deeply disappointed halfway through the meeting. The student counsellor intervened to ease the tension. Out of respect for their supportive counsellor, these students maintained a cooperative attitude and the use of respectful language. This confrontation ended up with a student victory to have their academic and residence units stay downtown. “I was already feeling great because we were able to debate and reason with the university. It felt even greater to have won”, said the participant (Interview notes).

The second example occurred during a CCP Committee Congress. Electing a CCP representative of every academic unit was routine prior to the school’s annual CCP Committee Congress. The candidacy of the CCP representative of the year in an academic department was given to a (titular) professor who enjoyed the title as an honorary placement but never fulfilled associated responsibilities – “no one knew the name before it showed on paper”, said one participant, “it’s some absurdity” (Interview notes). A few students suspected an election manipulation and one student decided to challenge the arrangement. The student collected signatures and votes from fellow students in the department, and the endorsement hugely outnumbered the department nominee. Shortly after, this student was called in by their counsellor. A conversation took place during which the counsellor claimed the votes invalid because the student did not meet eligibility for candidacy. The eligibility criteria, later found out by other students, was carefully designed to allow only specific candidates to qualify. The counsellor was reported to have hinted at the student that about “unintended consequences” for the development of their action if not ceased immediately (Interview notes). “You can’t fight the system”, commented the reporting participant, “your student counsellor is your first barrier”

(Interview notes). Disappointment was obvious in the participant's narrative when the attempt was seen by student counsellor as political threat and disturbance: "Our action was not to pursue any personal political ambition but to have transparent procedures as ordinary students, and when we want we could be participants of the system" (Interview notes).

The two cases above demonstrated the idea of a double-edge sword role student counsellors played in student life. Faced with a great deal of pressure from the university leadership to keep students under control, in both cases student counsellors responded swiftly to student actions. In the first case, it was obvious that a collective action was already in progress. The student counsellor took a cooperative approach to bridge the communication between student and university leaders and prevent the unrest from growing out of sight. In the second case, the challenging action with a clear political nature was quickly tampered down. The individual student was targeted and pacified to remove a perceived threat to a political decision.

A common approach towards engagement among first-line administrators was a "controlled participation" mode (Interview notes). Participants described it as "students were encouraged to participate, sometimes needed or even required to show a presence, but they were also fully controlled from sensitive topics or actions to avoid dissent" (Interview notes). The way student counsellors fulfilled their political due diligence implied in their work scope was institutional, in terms of the paramount need for stability, but also personal. As street-level recipients of university orders, student counsellors were a vulnerable group in the university system. Some student counsellors, in order to live up to their authority over students, might "brush things off and just send you away confused" (Interview notes). They were usually assertive in restricting student actions to avoid any confrontational circumstances. Others may use a different strategy for student unrest. They were more productive in helping students

negotiate reasonably with other campus partners. By doing so, students were guided to seek solutions within the system but under the pressure to behave themselves in the process because their counsellors were involved.

Faculty mentors with international exposure.

Previous studies on students' use of on-campus resources for grievance actions left out faculty in analysis because Chinese students' out-of-class interaction with faculty was seen as minimal (R. Zhang, 2009, pp.125); however, this study indicates that faculty of lower administrative ranking was one of the key resources for student engagement with institutional governance. As faculty promotion usually took a long time, faculty members with lower rankings were more likely new hires. In today's academic market for professorship, Chinese elite universities prefer doctorate degree holders from overseas or with extensive international experience. This preference, along with national initiatives to reverse "brain drain" phenomenon by attracting overseas Chinese talents to return to their home country, it was observed that the majority of low-ranking faculty members are young intellectual returnees trained in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, France, and other developed Western countries.

Participants commonly described those faculty members as open-minded, approachable, progressive-thinking, understanding, and supportive of their non-academic development including the ownership of their campus life. The international exposure allowed these teachers to examine the life of their students from a different perspective than those who were accustomed to the same system for decades. Many of them were also interested in sharing their personal experiences, advising students beyond academic concerns, and were usually more accepting of diverse voices. Additionally, the often-low administrative status of young professors weakened their authority in front of students. Research participants tended to believe

assistant/associate professors were less intimidating and easier to talk to while reputable full professors, chairs, and deans were more likely regarded as authoritarian, bound to state will, traditional, and controlling, even though it was not always the case. It is worth emphasizing that faculty ranking and the level of support they offered to students were not mutually exclusive. Many faculty members with higher rankings also shared the traits that made them ideal mentors for students in institutional processes, but there existed a popular belief among participants to favour low-ranking faculty for non-academic consultation.

For the reasons stated above, the young, low-ranking, internationally hired faculty members have grown to be an important source of mentorship on campus in encouraging students to develop leadership in their campus life and extend to public spheres. Among participants, the image of low-ranking faculty members was described often as a source of inspiration, validation, and encouragement for students to express their needs, beliefs, and values to the university. Occasionally, they supported students to potentially move forward with their idea either individually or collectively. For instance, in the case of ECNU's the first gender studies club, faculty support was essential. A few participants also mentioned that they were only able to talk to their “newbie” professors about their personal struggles and grievances caused by a preferential university system. Participants confessed that they might choose to remain silent at the end, but the validating comments they received from trusted professors such as “they should not do this” and “you should act on it” greatly boosted their confidence and feelings of worthiness. Evidence from this study found these students were more likely to seek for opportunities of change later on in their student life.

The Use of Social Media.

Social media as a new space of action.

Chinese students had a history of active engagement with university governance through online spaces. The Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) gained popularity among Chinese universities since Tsinghua University started the first Chinese university BBS “Shuimu Qinghua” in 1995. Chinese university BBSs rapidly developed as a platform for student voices and a virtual public sphere for campus life (Shi, 2018). During its decade-long golden time, university students enthusiastically engaged in BBS discussion from university-specific topics such as campus life to social topics such as public policy and international geopolitics. As a virtual university community, BBS was a powerful tool in influencing university decisions. It was not unusual at that time for university administrators to show up in BBSs and respond to student concerns directly. Some cases on BBSs attracted attention from the MOE to regulate unjust or unreasonable university policies.

The great potential of social media for mobilizing students embodies a rudimentary form of student movement. Living under the shadow of 1989, Chinese universities were alert that when dissatisfaction from students accumulates and ferments, it has the potential to escalate into a protest, something overly confrontational (R. Zhang, 2009). In 2005, MOE required universities transform their BBSs into an officially regulated platform managed by the university authority, and that student participants must be registered with their real name and personal information (*shimingzhi*). On March 16th, 2005, Shuimu Qinghua closed its open access and transformed into another platform managed by the university, marking the end of BBSs free speech (Ruanji, 2014).

In the same year, the demise of BBSs was accompanied by the growth of other new media products such as Xiaonei (later renamed as Renren), the Chinese version of Facebook initiated as a student network. While the business only sustained for a decade, its peak time

popularity again convinced Chinese students their need of an online student community. In 2019, WeChat and Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter) dominated China's social media platforms. In particular, WeChat, as a more intimate platform based on one's personal and social networks, became a crucial space for campus life and online expression. All participants reported talking about their unpleasant experiences with the university on WeChat. Most participant reported posting actively in their early university years but gradually phased out when they reached senior years to be more aware of "negative impacts" (Interview notes). Cooperation with the university was important to ensure a student graduate smoothly with their diploma at hand.

Some students who wished to break up the silence created individual social media accounts to publish commentaries on school policies and practices. Commentaries such as *What happened to you, Lianhua and the Disappearance of the Hexi Building and the Jumpstart of the Daxia College* talked about demolition of the campus market in residence and the new academy system imposed on students. According to participants of the study, having not been notified about these changes or invited to the decision-making process, many students were furious about the lack of transparency and the outcomes that caught their off guard with heavy impact on their academical and non-academical life. They were disappointed: "in the long run, it is the students' sense of belonging to and recognition of the university that wears off" (Fieldwork data). Moreover, some students doubted the function of their Student Union when compared it with the Peking University Student Union who wrote *the life and death of the Boshi market* to interrogate the university on the removal of their campus market and to speak up for the student body. The ECNU Student Union did not take any action in the two major university decisions.

Commentaries on flawed university practices such as the articles above were not appreciated by the university, resulted in frequently being censored and deleted. Participants

admitted a reality in which bloggers set a more realistic goal: prolong the “live time” as a victory (Interview notes). Student readers shared the same goal: within hours, shares of a particular article flooded the WeChat newsfeeds. When related commentaries began to dominate ECNU students’ WeChat moments a few hours later, students anticipated everything to disappear at a certain point as the university censorship worked to prevent the spread of student unrest. For those involved, it became a “Tom and Jerry” game as readers and bloggers competed with the university in spreading news. This ongoing circle of actions, seen as controlled unrest, characterized student engagement in Chinese universities:

Paradoxically, a censorship field aimed at detecting and suppressing student unrest created the possibility of giving rise to the creation of more mild unrest on the surface, but such unrest is usually produced in a controlled manner and kept within an official tolerance zone (R. Zhang, 2009, p. 297).

Sometimes the purpose of testing the tolerance zone was just to irritate the university leadership and to alert them of the existence of different voices. The university wanted to present a positive image of inclusive and democratic management with engaged students, but the political priority, represented by the censorship accountability system, required them to find a fine balance between the two ends. Student participants understood it was impossible to widen the influences of their commentaries, but they also knew they had the ability to start over with a new focus. While students were closely monitored through the university gaze, university administration was also pressured to address early signs of student unrest either through direct suppression or making amendments to appease students. As share by participants, in some cases, follow-up meetings with students were scheduled soon after a wave of social media complaints to “publicly solicit student opinions” (Interview notes).

Chinese universities have started to realize powerful nature of internet-based media that gave students an edge in their communication with the university. Participants reported that the university urged students to participate “using the right venue” and “avoiding discussion in private space” (Interview notes). The university had a clear intention to keep students voices inside the university system out of public attention. However, when faced with a lack of established processes for student feedback, participants inevitably found social media a more responsive space to talk in. What was “private” to the university was actually a publicly accessible space. “It is one of the few platforms that alter a vertical communication structure to be flat”, a participant commented on the reason for social media to be a go-to option for student voices (Interview notes).

Student creativity as leverage.

As a social media savvy group, young students also found themselves most empowered by their creativity and technical strategy to spread and store authentic information. For instance, when censorship posed a seemingly insurmountable challenge, participants used screenshots and captcha texted images to filter through the system, and employed blockchain encryption to preserve censored information.

Waves of student unrest online were observed around the time of investigation, during which students opened up spaces creatively to engage with university governance. The long, investigative, and argumentative articles previously mentioned resonated with their student readers and largely mobilized students’ awareness of their rights to be informed and consulted in major university decisions on student life. Some students started to highlight the invasion of university authoritative power into student life as it deprived them of their rights to participate. Students were forcefully silenced, but they quickly used creativity in a new post *the experience*

of living at ECNU. When readers opened the article, the content was a picture with text “This article has been deleted due to WeChat platform bylaws and regulations”. It was the exact text that would appear when an article was deleted, except that this time it was the intended content of the article. In a playful way, students accused the university with the interpretation of this post: the real experience of campus life was that public participation was being “deleted”, literally.

The Onion Investigation (formerly named *the ECNU Onion*) was representative of students’ online activism as the biggest unofficial ECNU WeChat account releasing student dissents. *The Onion* posts shared a satire style with a hint of cynicism for the current reality. *The Onion* had a sizable follower population for its “sharp” and point on story-telling about the unreasonableness of university administration (Interview notes). With the number of followers still growing, *the Onion* team saw the eagerness for students to safely vent their dissents in a playful manner. To provide a moment of humor and lightheartedness for students burdened with concerning university policies, “the Onion style” continued. For example, a post titled *the Shoe Work Department Instruction Manual* used a homophonic pun to criticize the controlling nature of the Student Work Department and their censorship mechanism as shoe (*xie*) and student (*xue*) shared similar pronunciation in the Chinese language:

The Shoe Work Department uses special materials to make shoes.
It is pleased to help others with their shoes. It has a powerful
searching and positioning function.

When Shoe Work Department makes shoes, it may cause
information loss. Please pay attention to backup.

The Shoe Work Department is good at discovering beauty for their
possession, but it repeatedly failed.

(The Onion Investigation, 2018)

Students with living experiences of the university's SWD could easily decode the satire masked as the instruction manual above. The make of shoes was the regulation of the students when the SWD claimed to serve its students. With this code, an interpretation of the first two paragraphs read: the SWD was happy to serve students using censorship for regulation. Its powerful censorship mechanism searched for dissents and located the contents to be purged. Students, please pay attention to backup because the SWD services had the risk of causing you information loss. The metaphor of beauty possession was situated in the context of institutional efforts to reduce dissents through initiatives to institutionalize student voices in students' formal engagement. With this understanding, the creator showed pride in maintaining the integrity of *the Onion* as a student self-organization. It was regarded as the beauty the SWD failed to possess.

Although the operation of *the Onion* remained underground with a closed membership system to protect its participants from sensitive university politics, a former leader of *the Onion* confirmed multiples sources of support they received for its daily operation. As a self-organization operated by a group of student volunteers without university sponsorship, monetary or honorary rewards, the majority of its executives were students from the journalism program who justified their commitments for professional development and the practice of journalist ethics. *The Onion* team also had a wide network with other student groups on campus. For instance, thorny issues students raised with the SCC were forwarded on a case-by-case basis to *the Onion* via private message between their student members in the hope that *the Onion's* creativity would help address student grievances beyond the SCC's capacity.

Imaginably, a great deal of power wrestling between the university and the Onion team took place. The university name "ECNU" was eventually removed from the account name as a

result of negotiation between *the Onion* and the university. Originated from a class assignment and then developed as a personal pursuit, the survival of *the Onion* account was uneasy (The Onion Investigation, 2019). One unique feature that distinguishes *the Onion* from other short-lived accounts was that it was supported by an ECNU alumni. According to the participant who served *the Onion*, their off-campus contact provided the team with an off-campus office base and defended the existence of *the Onion* with resources outside of the university system (Interview notes). It was unusual for a student self-organization like *the Onion* to display resilience confronting university administration and continue to grow by the time of interview.

Emerging Tensions with Student Requests

Institutional venues can be seen as the university's gesture to invite students in the peripheral structure of university governance, which in turn assimilated student voices and dissolved student unrest in the process. It is thus not surprising that participants' reported use of these venues was characterized as orderly, stagnant, and unproductive. In areas where the level of institutionalization was lower, with less scrutiny and procedural formality, conflicts gave rise to spontaneous, student-led actions. In this study, tensions built up predominantly in two areas: students' rising political awareness for governance transparency and gender representation. Student participants in the hope of expressing themselves and potentially pushing the existing boundaries a little further had initiative actions in the two areas. A continued negotiation between the students and the university was present when the institution worked to maintain its authority while students strived to pursue progressiveness. End of this section presents participants' reflections to show the procedural, cultural, and educational tensions they perceived in their engagement with university governance.

A Call for Governance Transparency.

As discussed in previous sections, the bureaucratic tradition of institutionalized student engagement venues has largely become a space where university reinforced its powerful regulation over regular students with student cadres, and thus rendered accumulating disappointment among students. In interviews, participants acknowledged that some students tried to be “the good officers” on student cadre positions, but they soon realized that the changing of university system was beyond them; others, identified the problems with the institution and saw a possible way out with an attempt to build a true student “self-organization”.

The Voice Group (*qun yan tang*) was a student club mentioned by four participants as active student engagement with the university procedures. The Voice Group collected student concerns informally – word of mouth, texts to their members, messages to their social media platform, etc. The members received the matters of concern would reach out to relevant parties, negotiate plans for resolution, and enforce appropriate changes. It was proactive in coordinating resources and efficient in finding resolutions that involve multiple stakeholders. For example, the Voice Group took the initiative to speak to campus security, logistics departments, and off-campus charity groups to discuss solutions for the stray animals occupying ECNU campus. In the process, the Voice Group members regularly update their followers via WeChat. This action also mobilized more students to set care plans for those abandoned pets.

The transparency persisted even when Voice Group took on student complaints more significant than a straightforward solution. Unlike student organizations that were embedded tightly in the university system, as a student club, the Voice Group was less interfered by the institution in its operational routines and thus less intimidated to take on tasks central to university policies. Most of the time the Voice Group members were not able to find solutions or

good answers to the big problems, but they showed an effort to fellow students as they hunted down answers from relevant authorities. They kept the public posted about progress they made or difficult conversations they had. It was the transparent process and the diligent attitude that distinguished them from the previous establishment of student engagement in university governance. As a student club, it once gained unprecedented popularity among students for its transparent and trackable process: “You could see the progress, get updates, and there’s always results to wait for (Interview notes).

The Voice Group explored and encouraged student initiatives in campus public affairs through student self-organization. By the time of interview, the Voice Group already declined. The active life of the Voice Group lasted only for roughly 1.5 years. Its brief life was an attempt to escape from the most intensive gaze received by institutionalized venues. Student members involved in this group were volunteers without any official recognition. They were not entitled to the same honor, glamor, or perks student cadres would have. While the lower level of institutionalization opened up spaces of action, the lack of financial and administrative support from the institution meant the survival of such groups relied on the personal sacrifice and leadership efforts of individual students. Due to the lack of continuing student leadership, the Voice Group activities were discontinued shortly after the retirement of its founding members.

The Pursuit of Gender Equality.

Since the #metoo movement took off in the US around 2017, it soon went viral across the world. It is debatable whether or not China had its own #metoo movement. The state censored and blocked the majority of posts with the #metoo hashtag. A myriad of social media posts did not use the exact hashtag language, but due to its nature against sexual predation, the stories were interpreted by English-media as #metoo posts.

China experienced vigorous feminist discussions around the time of investigation.

Universities came under the spotlight in this movement as the most widespread *#metoo* stories happened on campus. With the lack of institutional mechanism to respond to professors' sexual misconduct, some Chinese universities tried to downplay the issue and bypass systemic responsibility (Repnikova & Zhou, 2018). Only under tremendous pressure from the public, most accused faculty were eventually fired for punishment. The scandals broke the sacred image of academia and brought the issues of gender equality and power dynamics in workplace/school to discussion. Heated conversations on social media started to discuss the urgent need for pre-emptive initiatives to overhaul gender norms.

It is undeniable that the call for awareness was still one of the primary topics among social elites in China today. University students, as the educated mass in China, were considered as one of them. In this study, student participants demonstrated a strong sense of gender awareness and sensitivity to gendered social issues. Female students and students of the LGBTQ group, in particular, recognized their vulnerability in the social spheres for a just representation and fair treatment. Participants of this study did not report radical involvement in fighting sexual harassment; however, students chose to tactfully pursue gender equality in a milder and more general form to avoid immediate opposition with the university. They usually chose to adopt discourses that support building the image of school to find a balance between achieving their advocacy and triggering suppressive measures from the university. This study presents two stories to unfold the student strategies and initiatives for the pursuit of gender equality at ECNU.

The first story took place when a participant encountered two separate incidents within the same week suggesting evident negligence of the university in gender appropriation and unequal representation. A lecturer commented on female teacher students being the ideal wives

and “hot on the market” received numerous likes online among teacher students. A few days later, an ECNU admission advertisement video was released featuring only successful male students. Irritated by the intensity of unjust gendered images, a female participant of this study saw the prevailing gender norms and preferential treatment at the university, which were problematic to her. Consequently, she wrote a lengthy letter to the President’s Mailbox stating her concern. In the letter, she said it was not to accuse or to demand a specific measure against anyone/anything, but to bring an awareness to the university administration and urge for the public image of the university to be more gender sensitive. The letter strategically put the author and the university on the same boat to avoid being viewed as a challenging critic or a threat to the leadership. The student demonstrated her ability to work around the power relations and successfully delivered her message to the leadership. She also displayed a sophisticated understanding of the university system in her acceptance of the university’s response: “the reply did not comment on the video ad. I think it’s because it is much harder to deal with a collective leadership decision (on the admission ad) than to deal with a professor who had inappropriate comments” (Interview notes).

The second story was the tortuous establishment of the Commune of Sphericity (CS) club, the first gender and sexuality studies club emerged on the campus of ECNU. It was founded by five students in 2016 from the department of sociology. The club application adopted similar strategy trying to align their core values with university priorities and downplay the sensitivity of gender issues in the Chinese context. Students were fluent in discourses of “public health” and “enriching student life” to advocate for their own cause (The CS Founders, 2016). They used concrete examples referring both to national trends and international models to demonstrate gender studies as a widely accepted area of discussion.

However, the well-prepared application package did not guarantee smooth approval from the Club Association. After being informed by the student leader of the Club Association that “it’s all set”, the founders were contacted again and told the application was “probably problematic” (Interview notes). It was not defined as “unsuccessful”, but suggested that “there was unexpected tension from the higher up” (Interview notes). In the meantime, students were asked to delete the club foreword published online and cease all club activities.

It was a prepared battle for the CS founders, knowing that advocacy lay in the nature of this club. The students were ready to challenge and be challenged. They asked the Club Association to point out the article(s) from student club regulation used to decline the foundation of the CS. However, participant reported the answer from student cadres were intentionally blurred, only to suggest that an extra screening was created to stop this club application from being finalized. Soon after, a CCYL teacher officially informed the applicants that it was impossible for this club application to proceed. “It was done as gentle as possible”, said the participant, “she made sure we hear the decision and then she carefully soothed us to ease the tension” (Interview notes). The reason provided by the CCYL was “for the sake of protecting students” because “ill-willed individuals may potentially take advantage of students’ enthusiasm for their own good” (Interview notes). While carefully phrased for students, the response revealed the unyielding coercion and censorship in a sensitive state.

The rejection to this club application was a result of university priority to maintain stability by minimizing spaces in which students would potentially challenge the officially endorsed systematic patriarchal norms. A potential threat to the stability of state was deemed as against the public good and thus interpreted as “ill will” because of its disruptive nature to existing social order. Although the disappointing result was not unexpected, it was emotionally

difficult for the founders to realize the CCYL teacher, who was also trained in gender studies at the graduate level, did not become their ally. The students hoped for a role model in pushing changes in the university system. “It saddened us and discouraged us to pursue what we learned and believed to be valuable”, said the participant (Interview notes).

Nevertheless, the university’s rejection did not stop this group of students from the initiative in gender education but forced them to develop underground. On November 11th, 2016, the CS claimed its establishment to be “an ECNU-based independent student organization that focuses on issues of gender, sexuality and LGBTQ”. They soon published a more mature mission and vision statement in both Chinese and English. The English version read:

Our name originates from the Greek mythology of Spherical Creatures which is documented in Plato’s The Symposium. The image of Spherical Creatures, who are gender undifferentiated and combine the feminine with the masculine, represent the utopian campus we envision.

Our missions are: to promote academic activities surrounding gender and sexuality; to advocate gender equality and sexual orientation inclusiveness; to circulate knowledge regarding sexual health; to provide a platform for gender and sexual minorities and allies and create our own commune.

(Commune of Sphericity Student Club, 2017)

With a sustainable number of active student members, good rapport with local community groups, and strong support from faculty members who valued gender and sexuality education, the SC achieved great success hosting activities such as roundtable discussion, educational film/movie show, academic seminars, public workshops and lectures. The student activists, however, were still struggling with the dilemma of their status: whether or not they should keep fighting for official registration as a university student club or staying underground. The pros and cons were weighing themselves: the recognition of their organization was

important for their political legitimacy on behalf of the LGBTQ group, yet sacrifice would be to please and conform to the university system. Without the official stamp, on the other hand, the group enjoyed more freedom and operational autonomy but less accessible public/university resource for long-term development. By the time of interview, personal strings have remained vital for the SC club. While the progress of the SC manifested the perseverance of students for the pursuit of gender equality, the tensions also exposed fragilities in China's bottom-up mobilization on this matter.

Student Reflections.

Participants reflected on the tensions existed in their engagement with university governance related to the boundary of student engagement, the organizational and peer culture of engagement, and engagement predicament in a context without proper education on public participation and citizenship development. Eventually, participants also saw the inner conflicts among themselves for engagement.

Participants of this study exhibited a consistent agreement on the line between an easy-fix matter versus a hard-core problem. Hard-core problems were considered as those relevant to central planning and policy-making, headline marker incidents, and unfairness that affects a small number of students. Easy-fix matters, in contrast, were usually solvable technical problems and discussions that fit well within the university framework. Typically, those were logistical and technical issues found in participants reported engagement with university governance. The “flexibility level” for problem-solving varied, for instance, problems identified in an ongoing reform were much easier to address than those rooted in the tradition. Participants also showed more initiatives to work towards easy-fix matters while displaying negativity to tackle hard-core problems. This shared understanding was shown as a deeply implanted mentality that guided

student action, but it was never explicitly taught in Chinese universities. The unanimity in participants' conception was based on the knowledge they acquired through inexplicit learning in the same socio-cultural environment where they shared experiences.

It was evident in this study that student engagement was largely driven by their feelings to deal with grievances. The majority of participants chose to remain relatively silent: while they might have strong emotional reactions, they refrained themselves from actions (Interview notes). The interview asked why participants stopped and what stopped them to pursue resolution or change? The lack of motivation was the result of acceptance that their voices were low-impact. However, at the same time, participants indicated, "if someone acts on it, I am willing to follow and join the team" (Interview notes). Although most participants chose to stay silent for the time-being, all of them were positive about sharing their insights if the university had a more accessible feedback mechanism. The silence among was an actual display of students' apparent frustration with institutional failure to "close the feedback loop" (Carey, 2013). This study also observed a rather frequent mild student unrest fermented through the virtual online community where students vent their frustrations. Rarely, if ever, did students take initiatives to seek collective conversation with the university administration about their grievances. Unrest did occur, but it avoided direct confrontation and worked as a pressure mechanism to push the university into cooperation.

Participants often spoke of the peer culture for institutional engagement. Cultural schema was frequently mentioned by participants, most of the time as an unescapable force that bound them to a "norm" of indifference. In the meantime, they identified some students over others as more likely change agents and as more capable of bringing the vigor for active engagement. They referred to students were "reflective thinker" and who "have seen or experienced different

systems” to be potential active participants in the university governing process (Interview notes). Participants believed that these students were “mostly in the arts and social sciences” (Interview notes). Outgoing exchange study in other countries was also considered a transformative experience that increased student awareness, but domestic exchange programs providing immersion in other elite universities within China was considered less effective in pushing students to “level up the conversation about systematic issues in Chinese university administration” (Interview notes). “Those who came back from overseas had more powerful arguments because they saw how things worked differently...”; “...maybe we need more cultural brokers” said one participant (Interview notes).

Clearly, effective engagement was conditional on both institutional structure and student practice. While demanding more institutional attention to student voices, Chinese students in the study started to see the development of student capacity for authentic, meaningful engagement to happen. Participants doubted if students knew what effective engagement looks like. Finally, participants reflected on the lack of proper education to support the development of public leadership in students. Sharing an interconnected linkage to the cultural schema for engagement, the absence of participatory learning in Chinese universities was a major theme that arose in the interviews. Participants believed that the generally poor engagement dynamic observed was a lack of meaningful civic education: “the awareness of publicness, as part of active citizenship should be part of our education, but the school did not educate us on it” (Interview notes).

When participants were asked to portray their own participation in the university management, none of the participants self-identified as “active” in university governance (they use the word “public affairs” *gonggong shiwu*). The interviewer employed rhetorical questions to examine the layers of meanings in their negative self-portrayals. Interestingly, however, follow-

up conversations with many participants indicated they considered themselves to be potential activists. Indeed, most participants revealed an inner desire for active engagement, which was often suppressed. With time, they became passive, receptive, and silent. Table 4 provides a list of phrases that showed student participants' changing attitudes in the ways they described their participation. In accordance to Baxter Magolda and King's study (2007) on meaning-making assessment during interviews, interviews of this study provided a conversational space unusual to participants in their daily encounters which helped participants to form reflections and an integrative understanding of their past experiences. It was shown in the language they used towards the end of the interviews that they saw more perspectives for their (in)actions, which led to the realization of more spaces for action with a sense of empowerment and ownership in student life.

Table 4
Student Reflections on Self-portraits

First answer	Modified Answer By the end of interview	Reasons (if given)
“silent audience”	“Active participant in silence”	“Silence for the lack of governing power, and activeness for still caring and thinking about those issues.”
“detached opponent”	“There’s a pessimistic actor/activist living inside me.”	“It is my political aphasia (but I am political).”
“passive recipient”	“interest-related negotiator”	

“recipient”	“factual recipient, inner protestor”	“There exists soft protest.”
“negligible”	“I am a participant under set framework, but negligible outside of it”	
“pessimistic”	“unyielding non-violent participant”	
“passive observer”	“I used to be passionate for university life, now I am a conditional participant.”	
“neutral”	Active in student events and activities, passive in governance.	

Note. Compiled by the author from interview notes.

Power Relations in Student Engagement

To incorporate students' engagement with university governance requires the university to offer such inclusive practices. Although the university has been showing gestures of empowering students, it still has significant control over the extent to which students were encouraged to participate. The remarkable similarity of student thinking about the framework of university administrative boundaries echoed the implicit understanding of power relations on Chinese university campuses.

The Communist Youth League and Student Organizations.

It was evident that the student affairs management and organization of student activities in Chinese HEIs were highly intertwined with the university's political and administrative structure, if not entirely subjected to it. Student organizations on a Chinese campus are managed through the university's SWD and CCYL.

The university-level CCYL manages CYL membership and oversees political education. Student unions and clubs were thus the foci of the university CCYL's portfolio. It is fair to say that Chinese university student unions work under the supervision of the CCP carried out by institutional CCYLS. In theory, the CCYL was a guiding resource for the autonomous governance of student organizations staffed fully by students; however, in reality the CCYL was a supervisory unit. Based on previous studies by Doyon (2017) and Yan (2014) on student control and student mass organizations, the organigram presented below demonstrates the student affairs structure in a typical Chinese university, though the framework may vary slightly in different universities.

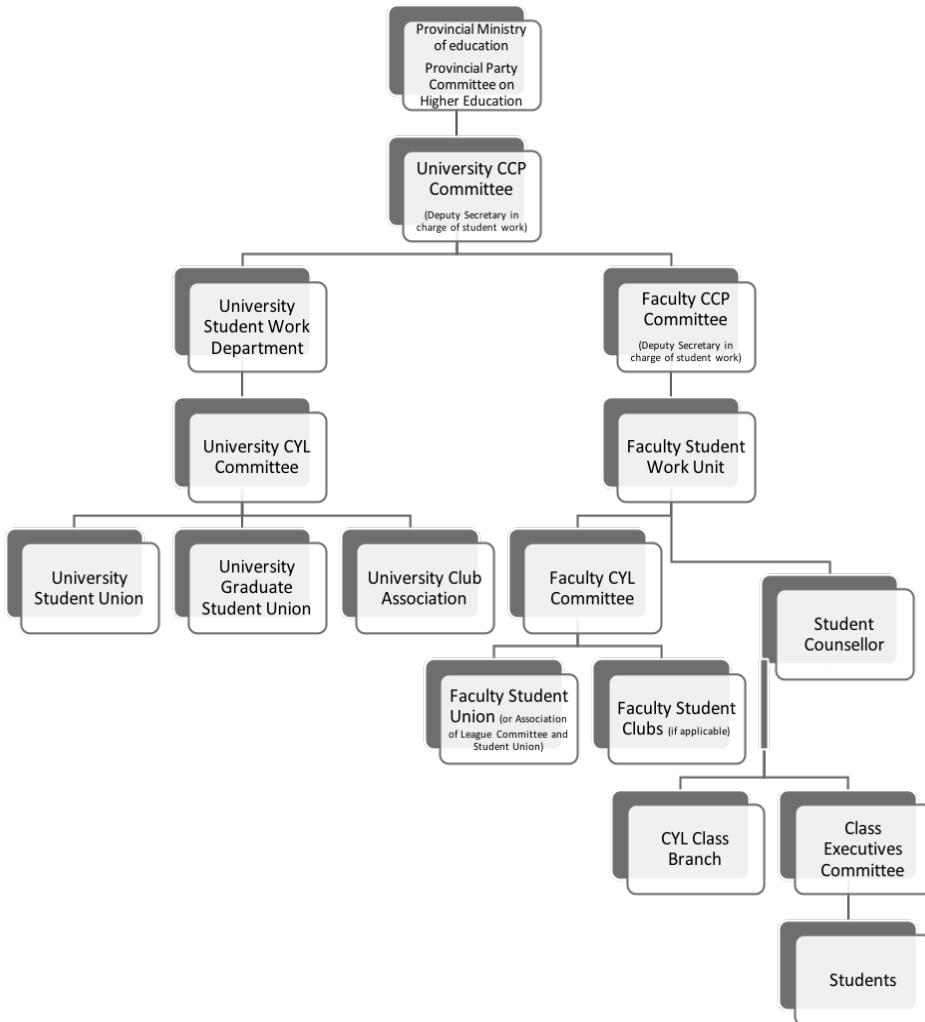


Figure 2. An Organigram of Chinese University Student Affairs Structure. Adapted from “Rejuvenating Communism: The Communist Youth League as a Political Promotion Channel in Post-Mao China” by J. Doyon, 2017, Colombia University Doctoral Dissertation, p. 198. Copyright 2017 by Jérôme Doyon; “Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China” by X. Yan, *The China Quarterly*, 218, p. 499. Copyright 2014 by The China Quarterly.

As shown in the Figure 2, CCYLS worked under the leadership of its same-level CCP committee and upper-level CCYL, and received directives from the provincial or municipal CCYL. The various student organizations from university to faculty levels were part of a

hierarchical system with the CYL as a key actor linking the CCP and the student organizations (Doyon, 2017).

In this hierarchy, appointments were made carefully to ensure smooth execution on the ground. A handful of full-time professionals served the university-level CCYL's daily operation. They were referred to by student cadres as "CCYL teacher" (the CCYL secretary, known as *tuanwei laoshi*) and often served as the final-decision makers of University Student Union, sitting above student leadership to ensure the CYL's grip over it. They were the actual regulating forces of any student organizations and public student events on campus. This control of the CYL over the University Student Union was reproduced at the faculty level: at each echelon, the CCYL teacher was a university staff that oversaw the same-level student organizations to ensure better supervision (Doyon, 2017).

Based on fieldwork of this study, university-level CCYL and Student Union worked slightly differently from the faculty-level ones. In comparison with university-level CCYL, the relationship between the faculty-level CCYLS and their students were more cooperative. In these CYL organizations, professional staff with decision-making power and should be distinguished from the many entry-level positions that were routinely held by students. The lower-level CCYL teachers were university employees in charge of student management, whose responsibility overlapped with the CYL's mission. Usually a student counsellor with some seniority took up the CCYL secretary role as part of their portfolio. To ensure efficiency in delivering assigned tasks, faculty-level CCYLS often appointed a handful of students for its daily operation. Because of the way it was organized, students commonly saw these CCYLS as the counterpart of faculty student unions. In smaller faculties, their CCYL and Student Union were sometimes merged into an organization called the Association of League Committee and Student Union (*tuan xuelian*),

where student cadres and the CCYL teacher formed a closer connection to carry out political, administrative, and educational tasks together.

In addition to student unions and the student CCYL associations, the Club Association (*shetuan lianhehui*) was another major student organization. The idea of student clubs in the Chinese context was similar to that of Europe or North America, established to focus on specific interests and hobbies. The Club Association oversaw the management and coordination of student clubs and their activities, similar to guilds in an industrial setting. It had a slightly lower hierarchical ranking as the University Student Union, but it faced the same barriers to autonomous governance: on paper, all student clubs received approval from the Club Association and accepted its regulation, but the CCYL was the final decision-maker. A CCYL teacher was assigned to give the final approval to all screening criteria for clubs and their annual activity reviews. Resources for the Club Association and the student clubs were supervised by the CCYL, who granted them funds, space, and authorization for events. Although the student clubs and the Club Association were under the CCYL supervision, student clubs were more loosely supervised by the university because radical political stand was not a common theme nor a concerning matter in most hobby/leisure-based groups. In this regard, students who hoped to create spaces of action with minimal interference from the institution saw student clubs as a space that enjoyed relative autonomy.

A recent political decree.

By the end of 2017, the Chinese CYL membership had dropped from 88.22 million in 2014 to 81.25 million, including 57.95 million student members (China Youth, 2018). It was still almost as sizable as the CCP, which had a membership of 89.56 million at that time (Lin, 2018).

Through seamless top-down supervision, the CYL replicated the organizational hegemony the CCP developed within the field of youth issues (Doyon, 2017).

Recently, the CYL was criticized for falling out of step with the party leadership and CCP intended to impose tighter controls on its youth wing (AFP, 2016). This started during Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign when CYL was accused of "becoming more and more bureaucratic, administrative, aristocratic and entertainment-oriented" (*jiguanhua, xingzhenghua, guizuhua, yulehua*) in 2015 (CCYL Secretary Office, 2016). As university students were an integral part of the process of (re)producing China's middle class and socioeconomic elite, concerns emerged from the CCP that the CYL was losing its political impact over the youth in an increasingly neo-liberal era. A reform experiment started since 2015 in Shanghai to reform the CYL leadership organs by cutting down full-time officials at the municipal level and replacing them with more lower-level CYL units at individual institutions (Doyon, 2017).

In March 2017, a national reform plan was issued by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council highlighting political training as the major task of all schools with a decree to strengthen education on Party theories, constitution, regulations and discipline (Xinhua, 2018). It demanded universities to significantly improve the "political consciousness, advancement and representation of the people" of student associations and unions of all levels, which indicated the National CCYL's ongoing and even increasing efforts in censorship and regulation over students (Central CCYL of China; MOE; National Student Association, 2017). As student organizations' resources and approval for activities were strictly controlled by the CYL, meaning its grip over student organizations would grow even tighter.

Student Counsellors in Student Regulation.

The heavy CYL influence in the organization of student life reflected the approach Chinese universities take towards student management. Maintaining hegemonic control over student life was impossible without the dedicated manpower. In a Chinese university, student counsellors, with the help of student cadres, was key to glue the student regulation system. The authority of student counsellors was significant: they are the departmental administrators and the direct governors of students' university life.

The counsellor system can be dated back to the education officials' system in early modern China. The movements of "abolish imperial examinations, develop schooling system" (Zhang Zhidong and Yuan Shikai's proposal in late Qing Dynasty on *feikeju, qibagu, banxuetang*) that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries prompted changes in social structure and education system in China (Z. Zhu, 2011). Changes in education administration followed accordingly. The inherited nature of education officials – to supervise, research, direct academic affairs and to report to higher-level administrative units – remained throughout the history of China's education supervision system. Those roles were equivalent to inspectors and counsellors in the late Qing (*shixue/quanxueyuan*), Republican China (*shixue/fudaoyuan*), and the wartime CCP liberated area (*xunshiyuan/fudaoyuan*) carried out similar responsibilities and accountabilities, all of which gradually evolved into today's dual track system that required university counsellors to perform both political administration and student advising in their job (Lo & Shen, 2011).

Although Chinese historical counterparts of what student counsellor is in today's context could be traced back to World War II, the counsellors (*fudaoyuan*) system was institutionalized on a Chinese university campus around 1980s. Before 1990s, student counsellors were called

“student political counsellors” with a focus on political education and ensuring political correctness in student life. In the following decade, universities saw profound changes and met new challenges in student life accompanied by the country’s economic policy shift, emerging new market, and rising social vitality. Student counsellors started to take on career services and financial aid on top of their political hats. The year 2004 marked the official institutionalization of student counsellor as a university profession in Document 16 where their job title was formalized as “student counsellors” (State Council, 2004). One year later, a follow-up MOE guideline was published to give more clarity to universities for the implementation of this profession. For instance, it defined the scope of the job and encouraged professional development for the building of a large grassroots student worker team (MOE, 2015). In 2006, MOE finalized the standardization of the occupation including its recruitment, responsibilities, and supervision in Document 24 (MOE, 2006). They were defined as “the core forces of carrying out ideological and political education for university students, and they are the organizers, implementers and mentors in daily student education and management” (MOE, 2006).

As demonstrated in Figure 3, student counsellors were managed by the university student work unit and guided by the faculty CCP committee. Despite of the removal of “political” in their job title since 2004, political control has been by far paramount in the nature of the job. What makes it different was the way political control was demonstrated in student counsellor’s daily work: it was no longer traditional nor obvious. Through overseeing student life and extra-curricular activities of the cohort, they were observant of deviant behaviors and political beliefs. In Chinese research universities such as ECNU, the recent movements of residential college (*shuyuan*) holistic education also required student counsellors to live in the student dormitories as a community builder, a mentor, and a role model for students in residence. Through frequent

interactions with students, they were required to report abnormalities and take actions against potential escalation. Maintaining stability and compliance always held priority over student interest, thus in a time of conflict a pro-institution action would be most likely.

Summary of Findings

This study introduced a variety of engagement approaches based on the level of institutionalization, formality, and direct relevance to the governing procedures. Students' formal engagement with university governance showed the institution's efforts to reinforce its authoritarian hierarchy. Student leadership in Chinese universities has been assimilated into the system through the student cadre scheme, a binding contract with the university that made it challenging for capable student leaders to choose an oppositional stance to the university. Because of this, major student organizations such as student unions maintained an apolitical character for its political survival, denied by participants as a legitimate venue for governance engagement. Newly established institutional venues such as the President's Lunch Meetings, Student Assistant Presidents, and the Student Consultative Council showed the university's attempt to consult with students and to create an image of active student engagement. While these establishments inferred influences from international examples, the system essentially remained unchanged with its Chinese characteristics.

In comparison, research participants made use of human and digital resources for informal engagement with university governance and identified spaces of action where the level of institutionalization was low. Informal interactions and personal connections proved to be more effective than the institutional process in university decision-making. Street-level administrators and faculty were considered realistic options for a productive conversation. This study also observed frequent low-level student unrest fermented in social media and online communities,

through which participants took advantage of the censorship mechanism and pressured the university administration to address collective student concerns.

In between formal and informal student engagement, tensions arose with students' pursuit of governance transparency and gender equality. Through student clubs (the Voice Group and the Commune of Sphericity) and letter to the President, students demonstrated an exceptional ability to act tactfully based on their understanding of local power dynamics, even as their vision was shaped by external knowledge about international trends towards more a progressive campus environment.

Significant power relations were manifested in the institutional foundation of Chinese university student affairs, represented by the leadership of CYL and student counsellors in student life and activities. Local branches of the CYL penetrated every level of Chinese student organization with a monopoly over student activities. As grassroots university administrators, student counsellors were the university's major instrument in dealing with students and ensuring political direction. When participants reflected on their personal struggles perceived tension in the engagement with university governance, the narratives again pointed to the overarching power relations that dominate student life in Chinese universities. Participants shared a consistent understanding politically challenging situations and avoided direct personal confrontation with the university administration. Most participants exhibited hope for more meaningful and vigorous student engagement in the university's governing process, but also highlighted deeply embedded cultural schema and a lack of civic education as major barriers.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings from this research showed the student engagement patterns in Chinese university governance and in relation to student agency and institutional processes. This thesis reinforces the idea that student engagement in governance shapes, and is shaped by, how the university operates. The first section of this chapter discusses the current dynamics of student engagement with institutional governance in Chinese universities. While Chinese students were considered generally docile and disciplined in the formal Chinese university structure, they demonstrated exceptional tactics in their informal interaction with the university to negotiate for their best interests. The second section focuses on “power” as a key word in student engagement with university governance. It is manifested in the organization of student engagement venues, the neutrality of student life, and the Chinese approach to citizenship development. The third section explains the glo-calization of Chinese higher education internationalization. With a clear intention to defend national interest, the Chinese state was cautious in the balance of international influences and the integrity of its own HEI system. The chapter closes with a discussion around the significance of this project.

Student Engagement with Institutional Governance: The Realities

This section discusses the university approach to student engagement, student interactions with the university administration, and the existing tensions in student engagement with university governance.

The University’s Approach to Student Engagement.

The past five years have seen the emergence of highly institutionalized venues as a university gesture to deepen student engagement in governance. The frequent occurrence of

President Lunch Meetings (PLMs) provided a space for the university leadership to consult student representatives or *vice versa*. The implementation of the Student Assistant President (SAP) and Student Consultative Council (SCC) were two prominent examples for involving student cadres to be “officers” in the administrative system. The increase in visible student involvement in the governance of Chinese institutions was generally interpreted as a positive direction towards effective student engagement. However, the meaningfulness of existing engagement patterns was unclear. Similarly, student organizations were reported to have grown in quantity and scope of involvement, but the changes tended to be “superficial” as they did not provide students with “real power” in the current Chinese system.

The practical scope and intensity of student engagement with university operations was minimal. In the Chinese context, student participation in the governing process remained limited to advisory roles through consultation rather than the formation of partnership as co-producers of their education (McCulloch, 2009). Most of the time, students were passively involved as a data source or merely to provide “representational consent” for managerial purposes (Marton, 2006). There was no guarantee that any feedback collected from students would be seriously taken into consideration in the decision-making process (Klemenčič, 2011). This pattern has also been observed in other Asian countries where student engagement is motivated by political parties or the university authorities (Acharya, 2015).

The university’s conception of its position and relationship with its students defines its approach to student engagement. How the institution is operated shapes its engagement pattern by enhancing the desired pathways and suppressing the unwanted actions in its governing system. When students were seen respectively as clients, citizens, partners, or leaders, the relevant perspective drove different educational practices. While there were genuine efforts in

diversifying student engagement venues for university governance, involving students in decision-making also had the potential of yielding unpredictable and difficult conversations that demanded institutional preparation and an ability to address properly. This was critically challenging for an elite research university in China that operated closely under state provision. Mentioned repeatedly by participants as “controlled participation” or “regulated participation”, the university was motivated to discourage unwanted engagement and their approach was often justified by iterating students’ apathy, inexperience, transience, incompetence, or the need for confidentiality (Tamrat, 2018).

Chinese universities demonstrated their political-realist approach as well as consumerist orientation described by Luescher-Mamashela (2013): The political-realist approach employed student engagement as an instrument to tackle student unrest for a more peaceful campus community through formal structures bridging student cadres and university authorities. The consumerist orientation took advantage of students’ consumer mentality – consumers have the right to be informed and to request services for the educational product – to enhance student engagement; however, focusing on reducing complaints and increasing immediate satisfaction of students’ day-to-day life on campus, it also winnowed down the educational emphasis of engagement to merely pragmatic. From the interviews, it was evident that the managerialist practices of both the political-realist and the consumerist orientation greatly hampered the effectiveness and authenticity of student engagement.

Students questioned if their representation was tokenistic in a governing process run by others (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Student cadres served as an effective means to address students’ consumer needs and to buffer conflicts that might escalate and jeopardize campus stability. Participants doubted their real influence in the governing process. In the meantime, the

formation of inner circles among student cadres alienated other students as they disregarded invitations to participate and to contribute. This may favor more articulate or self-confident students and as a result disproportionately excluded less privileged students (Carey, 2013; Wang, 2015). As suggested by Tu (2011) and Zhu, Shi, and Dong (2015), passive and inactive students in extra-curricular activities were common in Chinese universities, but the more engaged students showed significantly higher socio-economic status. This also aligned with research on students in Western contexts that found students with more social and cultural capital are better participants in student leadership activities such as student government (Sabri, 2011).

Students' Interactions with Institutional Administration.

The challenges in understanding Chinese student engagement with institutional governance was its unique social, cultural, and political context. Chinese universities follow a rigid administrative structure for governance, under which this investigation took place. It was full of context-specific terms that require clarifications for reader unfamiliar with the system. Administrative culture was prominent in shaping all academic and non-academic activities on Chinese campus. I found that R. Zhang's (2009) work most accurately described the administrative culture in Chinese universities:

In Chinese universities, the word “administrator” (*xingzheng renyuan*) implicitly contrasts to “faculty/researcher.” Virtually all non-teaching and non-research staff in a department or school can be called “administrators”. These would include student affairs personnel and various staff in charge of class registration and student aid distribution. In addition, “administrators” also carries a meaning of “administrative power.” Therefore, those faculty members who occupy a leadership position – deans, vice deans, chairs, vice-chairs, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary, and vice CCP secretary – are also “administrators” from students’ points of view. (p. 111)

Because of this rigid structure, students' identity and capacity for actions was defined by their position weaved in this hierachal web. Under this structure, student interactions with the university administration showed two major trends: to locate a "soft spot" in the web for engagement and to utilize the power of internet in a virtual space.

Personal Grievances in Supporting Services.

The commonality in participants' approaches to governance engagement was clear that students were driven by personal grievances and used them as a legitimate grounding for engagement. This distinguished the Chinese students' motivation for decision-making participation from their counterparts in Western democratic regimes. This provided an explanation for the methodological challenges encountered in interviews as participants avoided using or talking about "governance" but instead they preferred phrases such as "public affairs" and "common interest" in conservations. Participants' alleged ignorance of the word "governance" other than serving a pragmatic personal purpose implied riskiness of showing genuine interest in a more meaningful governing process, which was associated with a broader social and political agenda. While almost all participants saw themselves as apolitical in their student life, they were extremely sensitive to the cultural and political environment they lived in.

Out of politically-realist considerations, Chinese students in this study chose to seek solutions in supporting services. Findings on students' use of social media echoed with previous scholarly observations that most active and effective Internet activities were seen in the domain of support services (R. Zhang, 2009). Students showed their understanding for the different nature of issues between private grievances and public concerns. Some students felt empowered to participate online and exert public opinion pressure on university administration for a collective concern, but most of them kept silent with unfair treatment experienced on a personal

basis. Supporting services was found as a safe middle ground that bore a public focus. Seeking resolutions in supporting services had no direct personal confrontation between student participants and the university administration, but also provided a space and latitude for students to exercise their rights and power (R. Zhang, 2009).

Interestingly, in recent years, as competition in higher education intensifies worldwide, Chinese universities were not unique in the international setting that that pays more attention to addressing student concerns in supporting services. Regardless of political approaches to engagement, the consumerist culture has brought Western and Chinese universities together in seeing frequent interactions students have with their institutions in this area of interest. A UK study on student unions showed recent changes in student governments becoming more cooperative with senior management in a consumer-oriented higher education market (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015). As the Chinese HEIs' political priorities led to a consumerist demonstration to ensure students were content and stable, the UK institutions were also approaching a politically-realist case from a consumerist goal to hold "disgruntled and vociferous students" in check as they may "inflict significant harm to institutional reputation and recruitment" (Brooks et al., 2015).

Social Media on the Rise.

The media has become an active social player in China in the past forty years. A decade ago R. Zhang's survey already found students more likely to use Internet-based "new media" than traditional media for justice-seeking (2009). In recent years, social media has evidently broadened the scope of engagement for students by providing a new space for student actions.

R. Zhang's study (2009) examined the role of media in the resolution of university-student conflicts. She proposed three uses of media for student actors pursuing legal outcomes

against their institutions: media as informational channel, leverage, and validation. Media as informational channel provides important source of knowledge to its audience. Media as leverage took advantage of the public opinion supervision performed by the state to exert normative pressure on the university. Media as validation provides moral and emotional support for students. As students share their battles, it also helps to reinforce their identity.

While most of her analysis drawn on traditional media was still applicable, the unique traits of Internet-based new media, including accessibility, anonymity, and rapid circulation, largely distinguished the use and effects of new media from traditional media. Today's mass media, in general, is more than supplying information to recipients. While traditional mass media coverage is effective in political and social leverage, social media excels at legitimizing and validating actions that also reinforces identity. For instance, the effects of media as an incubator for student awareness was hugely enlarged on social media. As savvy netizens, students were immersed in online movements, examples led by the waves of *#metoo* activism exposed them to feminist arguments and allowed them to recognize the impact of the online expressions. The internet has had a profound impact on students' normative understanding, a "common sense" articulated within social practices (R. Zhang, 2009). The potential intensity of social media interactions made it a speedy process for new cultural understandings about student rights and democratic management to form and to transform day-to-day practice.

University students use the internet as an empowering mode of communication and tool for socialization (Tu, 2011). Although the university did not always respond to online dissent, the narratives shared by students help validate their feelings and purposes. Students were recipients of new information but also active users of social media in the spaces of action. They took advantage of the gaze through which the university censored information distribution to

exert a counter-pressure on the administration and create opportunities for negotiation. When participants claimed that they vented negative emotions online as a safe outlet, there was also a hope to have their voices resonate with each other so that a collective expression would potentially pressure the administration to open up conversation. The rise of internet-based new media has since become a hopeful venue for change. Student have shown to benefit from the flat communication structure, compared to the hierachal communication flow off-line, to gain a more equal voice in confrontation with the university.

Tensions and Potentials.

Evidence suggested changes in Chinese higher education have taken place not only at the institutional level, which followed a top-down pathway for formal restructuring, but also at the individual level, witnessing a bottom-up process with students' stronger self-awareness as stakeholders to participate in university decision-making. It remained unclear how the student engagement patterns noted in this study would impact a university on a larger scale and whether or not it would be a force that brings fundamental changes to Chinese campuses in future. It is doubtful that a modern university is void of active student participation in any way (Pabian & Minksová, 2011). This study found that participants acted in R. Zhang's "spaces of action" framework (2009) as they developed their understandings, explicit or tacit, of the resources and constraints in multiple contexts to exercise their agency in navigating the university systems (p. 321).

The transient life of the Voice Group student club resembled a rudimentary form of collective actions to cultivate partnership in governance with the university. The pursuit of gender equality as shown in the case of Commune of Sphericity (CS) student club and in the admission video disputes showed accumulating student dissents on university gender politics.

Participants purposefully employed politically accepted discourses and associated their arguments in line with the university image. These vivid examples showed that these students were extremely capable of finding sporadic spaces of action in university governance. This study addresses this key feature as an important representation of student agency that has been overseen or underestimated by policy studies. A close look at student engagement from within institutional governance, the research highlighted the intentionality in students' purposeful interaction with university administration as bearing potentials for meaningful student engagement in the future.

Student Preparedness.

The ineffectiveness of the current student engagement described in this study was not entirely a result of empty rituals, but also an observed under-preparedness among student participants for meaningful engagement. This included a lack of knowledge, skill, and awareness of their subjectivity as owner of the educational experience. Student admitted they were not used to being involved in decision-making in the past, and were experiencing trouble forming dialogue, reaching agreement, and seeking changes when taking up engagement opportunities required these skills. This scenario was not only common among participants of this study, but also concerning for some educator of China. They recently advocated to see student subjectivity and stakeholder rights (Huang, 2009; Li & Li, 2015; Luo, 2015; L. Z. Sun, 2015; Wang & Su, 2015). Others proposed the building of transparent university processes to shift the current patterns (Dong, 2015; Zhou, Sun, & Tan, 2016). The suggestions emphasized the importance of educating students to develop their internal capacities while providing external opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Student engagement was also an emotional and cognitive contract between students and their universities (Trowler, 2010). Students' purposeful formation of their voice and choice in their engagement was interconnected with student agency, which cannot be separated from the environment they interacted with. The university environment was determinant in the culture of ownership and in the ways its structure empowers or domesticates student. Grant (1997) introduced the "discourse of studenthood" that was "dynamically produced by and in turn produce the institution" (p. 104). It provided the idea of a student and what it meant to be a good student. These public discourses constituted students' self-knowledge of the ideal student. This conscience, in addition to the visible organizational structures, performed student self-regulation invisibly in their interactions with the administrative institution. The insufficient multi-dimensional preparation for student engagement and the "domestication of student voice" (Morley, 2003, p. 90) contributed to the tensions in Chinese students' interactions with their university administration.

Power and Politics in Student Engagement: The Implications

This section addresses power relations in the governing process shaped by the Chinese political context. It continues to incorporate student reflections on their engagement or disengagement into the discussion of Chinese university governance.

The Centrality of Power in Engagement Activities.

Power relations was a defining theme reflected in Chinese students' engagement with their administrative institution. The "centrality of power" examines the governing techniques university used to engage or disengage students (Carey, 2013). The operation of an institutional venue impacted the accessibility of a venue and determined students' reach in university decision-making.

ECNU offered an infrastructure for engagement infused with restrictions. The formalized processes contained in institutionalized venues for student engagement was a potent symbol of the power imbalance between students and the administration (Carey, 2013, p. 145). Formalized processes gradually became “empty rituals of participation” (Arnstein, 1969), a description accurate for the PLMs. Attendees were unsettled by the surrounding cameras and the row of suited-up senior university leaders in front of them. They felt too exposed to speak when the power imbalance was enlarged through these rituals. While the rituals were important for its symbolic meaning-making that provided validation for participants and enhanced solidarity, the reliance on meetings overlooked the fact that ritualized spaces may discourage engagement (Carey, 2013; McComas, Besley, & Black, 2009). Participants’ feelings of discouragement were prominent especially among those without personal connections with senior management.

It was hard to imagine that the university was not aware of the inefficiencies caused by its setup, but all indications were that such rituals were likely to continue, intentionally or by institutional inertia. This ritualized space performed a regulating function that lowered the chances of dissent and increased conformity. By doing so, the institution managed to keep students complacent and fulfill its political priority. The restraints for student expressions were, on another level, a means for the institution to mitigate pressure for difficult conversations. The rituals also substantiated the university’s commitment for better student experience to provide physiological reassurance for students with doubts. In short, as previous literature articulated, these participatory activities “[did] little to broker any realignment of power between students and their universities” (Carey, 2013, p.40).

The political implications of the CCP doctrine were much stronger than expected in this study for its powerful influences in shaping institutional culture and operational norms. As

extensively elaborated previously on features of student organizations, the Committees of Communist Youth League (CCYLS) at all levels in the institution closely monitored and managed student activities. Participants that hoped to find extended room for more diverse activities, for example, those trying to establish the Commune of Sphericity (CS) club, were often frustrated by the resistance they encountered from the CCYL teachers. Some participants regarded these professional staff as old-fashioned and stubborn with abusive power against student initiatives; however, the vulnerability of the CYL was noteworthy. Within the HEIs, young CYL professionals were preoccupied with political priorities from the CCP committees and the administrative tasks from university authorities while at the same time stranded in academic and generational hierarchies that inhibited their ability to undertake pro-student action (Tsimonis, 2018).

Neutrality in Students' Social Life.

Under the leadership of CCP and the supervision of CYL, neutrality in student engagement was viewed as an intentional social construct and a form of (a)political education. It was clear that students and the university formed an understanding that student engagement should remain as apolitical as possible. As shown, neutrality was carefully maintained in all student activities. There was little political or social agenda attached to student engagement. The apolitical nature in representation and the neutrality of engagement was itself a political form of the Chinese system. Hayhoe (1993) suggested there was an obvious contrast between the approaches to political education culture in Chinese universities before and after the 1989 Student Movements (Hayhoe & Briks, 1993). The current approach of neutrality reinforces state control as it “blocks Chinese universities’ link to their intellectual tradition of participating in national politics either as a shared power holder or a representative of public opinion” (Zhong,

1997, p. 233). As reflected in participants' self-portrait narratives, Chinese students were aware of the apolitical politics with an accepting attitude because it echoed the reality of a censored social life they live in an authoritarian state. Some participants did see the extension of public sphere on campus to an adult civic life, but not all shared an equally high-level awareness of the potentials of public participation.

The present tranquility of the Chinese university campuses was forged at a price. Experiences articulated by participants in this study conformed to Tsimonis' (2018) study that concluded Chinese students' stance on the SWD-CYL student management system was "cynical". Due to the low capacity of the CYL in responding to emerging tensions and grievances among students through institutional venues, the CCYL was positioned in the university system as a "ceremonious and anachronistic political organization" and further substantiated a prevalent political cynicism (Tsimonis, 2018). While the increasingly diverse but apolitical contents of student activities retained a clear political objective to incorporate students in a controlled participation mechanism for monopoly over student activities, students' public performances of obedience, conformity or indifference may also be a form of silent defiance (Doyon, 2017; Tsimonis, 2018). This political apathy in Chinese university students has raised concern for its long-term impact on China's political future (Yan, 2014).

The participants reckoned that ECNU had always been a rather neutral site since the establishment of the New China, unlike some of the more well-known radical university campuses. However, even campuses such as Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, which is home to many social activists and public discussions in modern China, the "publicness" of student life was also considered to be in decline (Interview notes). While this study found the neutrality a political feature of the Chinese experience, it is also a global trend for increased

personal anxiety and decreased interest in the public engagement with social issues. Participants found the cost of free expression becoming too high in an individualistic society. In China, student cadres were motivated to benefit from university favoritism to advance their careers, becoming reluctant to expend emotional energy on confrontation that could potentially constrain their future. In the hunt for social capital, personal status and achievements were highlighted, but failure and unfairness were imputed to individual problems. Embedded in such a social reality, individuals were preoccupied to climb up the social ladder and cope with increasing personal anxiety and loneliness.

From Engagement to Citizenship

“Our behaviours do not always say what’s on our minds”, said one of the participants (Interview notes). This section further explores the interpretations of what has been observed and heard. As discussed above, student engagement has a political dimension which leads to students’ citizenship development. This section provides insights to the formation and the future of China’s citizenship education implied by student engagement, their self-reflections, and the journey to a deeper-level reflection during the interviews.

The Practice of Chinese Citizenship.

Citizenship is a multidimensional concept which originated and was largely constructed in Western societies, and is often partnered with talk of civil society and democracy. It refers to a particular facet of individual identity in a civil, political, and social community and relates to two sets of interacting features: responsibilities and obligations versus rights and freedoms. Marshall (1950) concisely defined citizenship as “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community” and the possession of such status “are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (pp. 28-29). Deeply embedded in historical, social, and

political contexts, every state responds to civic pedagogy differently (Tu, 2011). Geographic locale used to be a key defining factor in one's learning and practicing of citizenship, however, global penetration introducing increasingly porous social realities has posed challenges for local communities in political legitimacy and citizenship education (Rhoads & Szelényi, 2011, p. 16).

HEIs are presumed, especially in Western democratic states, to prepare students with the knowledge and tools to start an engaging civic life as young adult citizen. English literature that saw HEIs as sites for citizenship learning usually contained an ideal model of citizenship development for educational programming. However, it is questionable if the notions of "citizenship" and "civil society" constructed in Western scholarship are applicable to China (Law, 2006; Schulz et al., 2018). For instance, the idea of citizenship is connected with the self-consciousness of a one's social position, rights, and responsibilities in the society they live as citizens, but the emphasis on citizenship varies in different cultures. Scholars of Asian citizenship noted the way citizenship was narrowed down in scope by using Confucian discourses to create a different understanding for practising citizenship. The Confucian values translated in Chinese ideology highlight personal responsibilities for the society as a moral quality and should override the entitlement of individual rights (Kennedy & Fairbrother, 2004; Xu & Su, 2011).

Compared to the Western "learning citizenship" model, Chinese scholarship took an "active construction approach" to citizenship development by examining the grievance process where students seek conflict resolution themselves instead of the traditional student governments (R. Zhang, 2009, p. 344). It suggested that the Chinese context may not be easily explained using Western scholarly discourses. Cross-cultural examination requires a step back from the universality of values. Globalist citizenship discourse engenders national identity and has been

re-contextualized in countries with strong traditional values. HEIs exist to achieve public purposes are shaped by political intentions and thus approach citizenship curricula and practices accordingly.

This study confirms a perspective that the Chinese approach to citizenship has to be understood within its national context. Although the political-cultural atmosphere in Chinese universities constructed a uniformity of political doctrine that suppressed the development of student agency and civic awareness, university campus was revealed to be a contested site where student engagement with university systems, such as demanding procedural transparency and resolutions in supporting services, constructed an interactive process. Evidence from findings showed Chinese students were not oblivious to the political aim of a neutralized university life, and they had the capacity to engage with the university environment. They should not be regarded as passive recipients of ideological pedagogy. Instead, the demonstration of student subjectivity and agency showed students' progress in self-formation through the practice of citizenship in the spaces of action available to them or which they created (Lee, 2004).

Towards a Civic Future.

Despite a certain degree of concern, this study holds a positive view for the future civic engagement of Chinese students. Throughout the interviews, participants exhibited negativity and passiveness when reflecting on their experiences and positions in student engagement, but this research has also uncovered nuances behind short responses.

When a lack of verbal expression occurred during exchanges with students, I used follow-up techniques described by Baxter Magolda and King (2007) to create a space for participants to hear themselves in a conversation atypical in daily life, through which they could process conflicting information and reflect on experiences to develop their own purposes and

meanings. Participants reconsidered their answers about self-portraits at the end of the interview to reveal a desire for an active civic life. Despite the socio-political reality they were in, participants showed they became more aware of spaces to engage with a sense of empowerment and validation.

Students are undoubtedly agents for social change and key to knowledge (re)production (Rhoads & Szelényi, 2011). De Sousa Santos' concept of emancipatory production (2006) acknowledges students' capacity to produce/apply knowledge that promotes equality and justice. However, they will not see themselves as "capable of constructing knowledge" until they feel validated for their voices (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p. 376). It is thus important that students find validation through informal interactions with like-minded peers, teachers, and other sources of support to understand their potentials.

The Glocalization of Student Engagement in China

The final research question points to internationalization process reflected by student engagement in governance at ECNU. This section concludes the discussion of this thesis with a focus on the glo-localization process.

This research project was initiated with expectations about the influences of globalized ideas on Chinese students' perceptions and actions relevant to university processes and the institutional responses to the changing social relations reflected in university settings. Although the investigator approached empirical data with conceptual frameworks that place Chinese student engagement in the context of global scholarship, findings did not suggest internationalization had a directly significant connection with student engagement. The findings confirm that Chinese universities prioritize political stability in their student management. This was evident in the marginalized position and apolitical nature of student organizations, the

ineffectiveness of institutional venues for student voices, and the monopoly of the CYL in student activities, all of which weakened the potential influences of internationalization in student engagement.

Nonetheless, the broad relevance of Western influences in current student-university interactions was manifested in the international modeling, the increased use of the English language, and student activism with visions shaped by international exposure. As seen in the institutionalization of new student engagement venues at ECNU, for instance, the SCC was modeled after a Western prototype of student senate. However, the reality was that despite the conceptual association the new organizations had with a democratic student government, their practice was inconsistent with the goal. An intentional use of the English language in wording shared a similar linkage to the Western norms to justify the meaningfulness of these setups as they were implied to be successful in world-renowned universities. It shows Chinese HEIs were clearly under pressure to respond to increasing student dissatisfaction in a way that would boost student confidence in university services and buffer the institution from immediate failure when these initiatives place the university into a scheme of global measurements (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Students' international exposure through personal experience or that of others provided them with the external knowledge that shaped an engagement vision among active student participants for a more progressive campus. Online communities and internationally returned faculty served as an important source of inspiration and validation.

Second, tensions were identified in the student-university relations. Students' growing intolerance with the authoritarian administration is prominent among participants. Students recognized their student identity as stakeholders with the rights to be informed, involved, and to participate and contribute. Tensions surfaced when decision-making processes deprived students

of their consent to a new policy or of their freedom to comment on perceived injustices. Students' familiarity with internationally prevalent discourses such as student rights and procedural justice through global exchange of information and ideas enabled them to become well versed in demanding and defending what they wanted and should have. Universities, on the other hand, were not effective in response, except in "shutting off" conversations. Student power was seen as rising in Chinese HEIs in recent years, however, these campuses remained a contested site (Dong, 2012; Zheng, 2013).

The heavy CYL influence in student activities reflected the approach ECNU took towards student management that was far from autonomous student politics. In fact, the idea of autonomy needs clarification in the Chinese context. Unlike Western universities, Chinese universities were under the government control with highly centralized structure, operation, and management, and thus, they approach autonomy within the framework of government policies. In Zhong's (1997) comprehensive analysis of Chinese university autonomy, she distinguished the Western idea of university autonomy for academic freedom and intellectual integrity from Chinese characteristics, which highlights autonomy as self-mastery, a means for its social orientation and political purpose, and a collective approach that focuses on the control of the whole institution. While the exact pragmatic meaning of autonomy is still being defined in China, autonomy for Chinese university governance is not anticipated to deviate very far from its current nature for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, recent years have seen the acclaimed autonomous university campuses in the Western world to become heavily impacted by national and international politics. In a broader context, Chinese higher education parallels the international tide that universities live under increasing state control for national interests instead of preserving autonomy (Yang & Welch, 2011).

Despite substantive analysis of the internationalization of Chinese HEIs, from a student engagement perspective, Chinese research universities are essentially still “Chinese”. Elite universities in China share a joint commitment with the Party-State on the quest for world-class status, but a status in which the state still plays a decisive role (Marginson, 2011). The mentality of internationalization in Chinese higher education is for the collective good and national strength through a top-down process. Chinese higher education remains highly centralized and administrationalized even though both the state and the HEIs have vocally advocated for governance autonomy and democratic student participation. The university’s gesture for expanding institutional venues for wider student engagement was not an open invitation, but instilled with restrictions and cliquishness. Activities for student extra-curricular engagement were developed by the institution as a response rather than by design. The managerial orientation and stability control in Chinese university student affairs was paramount. In this study, when students demonstrated active citizenship and an awareness of publicness in social issues, they were discouraged by university system that upheld political priorities. Student self-organizations, subjected to university gaze and supervision, were held in check and usually transient if they were deemed as politically challenging, as seen with the Voice Group. Liberal ideas, including critical thinking abilities, global citizenship, and active civic engagement potential that centers on individual capacity-building does not align with the inherent logic of a centralized higher education system. Therefore, it is fair to say that the recent reinvigoration of student engagement venues at ECNU served a better image for the university, but the institution is still a few steps away from developing a truly internationally-informed, meaningful, and authentic student engagement landscape in governance, which is a common challenge shared by most universities in today’s higher education.

National Interest Comes First.

Globalization, essentially economically driven and hierarchically organized, is distinct from true internationalization created by mutual interactions between the global and the local. With deep-rooted cultural values and decades-long intense administrationalization for political control in Chinese HEIs, any reform for internationalization is anticipated to meet strong tension of global-local interaction and restructuring at the local level. China also has its own internationalization discourse which underlines nation-building in ideology, goals, and means. Internationally heated discussions associated with higher education internationalization, such as student socialization, intercultural competences, and global citizenship, (Deardorff, 2006; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013), were not the mainstream discourses nor the major facets of the Chinese higher education internationalization. In China's march towards internationalization, it embraced global collaborations to boost its academic productivity and international reputation, but it was also constantly alerted to the consequences of globalization. The state actively sought a balance between allowing international influences and maintaining the Chinese integrity in Chinese HEIs.

It was apparent from the waves of reform in the Chinese ideological-political education that the government had a clear intention to defend national interests by eliminating global influences (Tu, 2011). Before 1978, higher education was a tool of political indoctrination and a base of government servants. With the economic reform and higher education massification since 1978, the goal for universities to drive economic development has been fused with neo-liberal market benchmarks. In the booming years of developing the dual economic-political status of Chinese HEIs, the supremacy of the nation-state was considered engendered in the face of cosmopolitan values. In Hayhoe (1996)'s analysis of the historical development of the

Chinese universities, higher education in China has been essentially a social experiment to bring together the Communist project of socialist construction and a nationalist effort for capitalist modernization. Whereas the notion of global citizenship has come under the spotlight of academic discussions that consider higher education “a principal catalyst and defender of global civil society and its ethos” (Keane, 2003, p. 137),

The politics of China under President Xi’s leadership was moving towards the direction of strengthening political control of Chinese HEIs. It was not long ago when the state demonstrated its intention to resolve systemic bureaucracy in university in favour of academic freedom and integrity (MOE, 2010; Ye, 2012). However, since 2013, the restoration of political order in HEIs re-emerged as a priority and techniques involved a more tightened censorship system to track students with set protocols of precautionary actions to avoid turbulence especially on the internet. The CCP has signaled its determination to unify educational ideology on university campus through the “Seven No Talks” document circulated among local CCYLS to ban topics such as civil rights and universal values from academic discussion with university students (BBC China, 2013; Farrar, 2013). HEIs were demanded to sharpen judgment against “wrong schools of thoughts” because these ideological flows may weaken social cohesiveness of the present Chinese society (J. Zhu, 2013). These initiatives emphasized Chinese government imperatives to address the developmental dilemmas arising from globalization.

The CCP saw a drawback of globalization on ideological culture as it spread the multiplicity of political and social values and challenged the CCP’s political propaganda. The CCP has come to realize that streamlining public discourses was a more challenging battle. In recent years the state shifted from strong encouragement for recruiting international talents to Chinese universities to criticizing universities for having overdone “internationalization” and

underestimating the damage of Western intellectual culture on China's ideological security (Ma, 2017). The HEIs' efforts to connect with the international community resulted in lowering the efficacy of the existing political curriculum. The CCP was concerned that the legitimacy of their political doctrine grew as the pursuit for building world-class universities also intensified Chinese students' familiarity with Western liberal ideas (Z. Li, 2019). Under this pressure, the state reinstated the political attributes of Chinese HEIs as they should be the frontier of ideology construction (L. B. Sun, 2015). Chinese universities, as required, show Chinese characteristics in a dialectical unity of its political, academic, and social dimensions in providing higher education.

Significance of Research

This thesis investigated empirically the student engagement in university governance processes using a multi-dimensional theoretical framework. The significance of this thesis is both scholarly and practical.

The immediate influence of this study lies in its contribution to existing literature on higher education internationalization and student engagement in China. Specifically, this project provided an opportunity to accommodate understanding of higher education in a non-Anglo-Saxon context in a detailed case study of Chinese student governance engagement. The research highlighted two major gaps in the existing literature relating to this topic: the managerial bias in Chinese literature on student engagement and the void of Chinese student leadership studies in the English language literature. This study addressed the problems of using Western-based theoretical frameworks to examine Chinese circumstances, and thus made a significant contribution to enriching mainstream theories with the empirical evidence of the up-to-date Chinese experience. By illustrating Chinese student agency in the public sphere of student life,

this thesis also adds to the existing knowledge on the trends of student public participation within China's political context.

This study also contributes to our understanding of the globalization of higher education by exploring the often-overlooked local political dimensions of higher education internationalization. Researchers have already started to point out problems in treating internationalization as a neutral force in today's HEIs that disregards global entanglements and local hierarchies (De Sousa Santos, 2006; Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo, 2009). The worldwide model-driven stratification system and uncritical international policy transfers from one context to another are problematic. Spring (2009) suggested a "global superstructure" (p.1) from which the internationalization of higher education adopts policies and processes. So-called international standards continue to be dominated or determined by Anglo-Saxon paradigms, implying a legacy of colonialism and the danger of a new imperialism in education (Mok, 2007). The global systemic process illustrates the social capacity, historical continuity, and global interdependence in (re)producing colonial outcomes (Friedman, 1994).

Finally, this study has provided important insights for policymakers and higher education practitioners. The discussions will allow policymakers to critically reflect on issues in the current trends of higher education internationalization and develop policies for a more just and responsive education system. Chinese educators may see the importance of building university processes to enhance meaningful student engagement. Western scholars may challenge their HEIs to confront their position in the "global web of responsibility" and to recognize their pivotal role in breaking colonial hierarchies in the internationalization of higher education (Massey, 2004; Waters, 2018). This project also provides cross-cultural knowledge for international education in today's HEIs with increasing human mobility. The lessons arising

from this research will inform practitioners to accommodate understanding of student experiences in non-Western social, cultural, and political contexts and develop practices best suited for student development.

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Appendix A

Approval for Human Participant Research



Office of Research Services | Human Research Ethics Board
 Michael Williams Building Rm B202 PO Box 1700 STN CSC Victoria BC V8W 2Y2 Canada
 T 250-472-4545 | F 250-721-8960 | ethics@uvic.ca | uvic.ca/research |

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Siyi Cheng UVic STATUS: Master's Student UVic DEPARTMENT: PAOR SUPERVISOR: Dr. Andrew Marton	ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER: 17-157 <small>Minimal Risk Review - Delegated</small> ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE: 02-Jun-17 APPROVED ON: 02-Jun-17 APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE: 01-Jun-18
PROJECT TITLE: Student Engagement with Institutional Governance in Contemporary Chinese Universities - an Internationalization Process	
RESEARCH TEAM MEMBER None	
DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING: 1. Student International Activities Fund (pending); 2. PAAS Student Research and Exchange Award (pending); 3. CAPI Graduate Research Fellowship (pending)	
CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL <p>This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.</p> <p>Modifications To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.</p> <p>Renewals Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.</p> <p>Project Closures When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.</p>	
Certification	
<p>This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">  <hr style="width: 20%; margin: 5px auto;"/> <p>Dr. Rachael Scarth Associate Vice-President Research Operations</p> </div>	

Certificate Issued On: 02-Jun-17

17-157 Cheng, Siyi

Appendix B

Interview Question Clusters

Cluster 1: general student life perceptions

- What year are you in? What's your disciplinary background?
- What are some words to describe your student life at ECNU?
- Are you satisfied with your ECNU life and education?
- What do you like/dislike most about attending ECNU? What did you or did you not do about these things? (why and how)
- [Students with international education experience] Tell me more about your exchange (or other international study) experience.

Cluster 2: student engagement with extracurricular activities

- What extracurricular activities are you involved in?
- What were your expectations for participating in these extracurriculars?
- Tell me about your experience in the student organizations you are involved in.
- Tell me more about your feelings about/understandings of these organizations/activities?

Cluster 3: student knowledge and participation of university governance

- Have you heard about “university governance”? How do you perceive this phrase? What are you thinking when hear this term?
- What is campus “public affairs” (gonggong shiwu) to you?
- Do you know any activities held or venues created by the university to engage students with discussions of university governance/public affairs?

- Are you aware of any less official or informal ways through which you may be address your concern on campus?
- Have you ever been part of the processes above? Tell me about your experience. How do you perceive your experience (of participation or non-participation)?
- What are the roles of student organizations (e.g. the Student Union, the Student Congress) in university governance/public affairs?
- What are some significant changes you have witnessed at ECNU outside of the classroom?
- How does the university take student voice under current reforms?

Cluster 4: student grievances and handling

- What were the major incidents you encountered at ECNU that triggered considerable student grievances? Tell me more about such incidents, students' reactions and university responses.
- How did you feel about [a certain incident], and what did you do?
- What have you observed other students done about [a certain incident], and how do you feel about it?
- If a student holds dissents towards the university, what do they usually do?
- What experiences have you had interacting with the university to express your concern or grievances?
- What does internet posting/venting (tucao) mean to you? Does it help students unite or confront the university?
- Do you think the university tend to respond more to some matters over others?

Cluster 5: student experience and reflections

- In your view, how does ECNU engage students with university governance? What is the cultural setup for student engagement?
- How does student voice impact decision-making? Have you seen change during your time at ECNU? Could you elaborate more on the changes.
- What do you think of the student-university relationship at ECNU? Do you have an ideal for student-university relationship?
- How do you think students should be engaged with university governance? How is ECNU doing?
- How do you portray yourself in ECNU's university governance/public affairs?

Appendix C

Email Recruitment Script

(This script is delivered in Chinese)

Dear [Name],

I, Siyi Cheng, a graduate student of Pacific and Asian Studies Department at the University of Victoria in Canada, am contacting you regarding my upcoming research study entitled “Student Engagement with Institutional Governance in Contemporary Chinese Universities – an Internationalization Process”. This study will provide empirical evidence on student engagement with university decision-making in China. It is my belief that your personal experience and knowledge of these practices will be of great value to this study.

The purpose of this study is to understand student engagement with university governance under the Chinese higher education internationalization agenda. This investigation will address local transformations and global impacts in relation to university structure, thereby establishing the basis for the subsequent empirical work to examine student power practices. This investigation will use first-hand knowledge provided by students to explore the formation and development of a new landscape of student-university relationship in Chinese higher education.

Students’ position within a university’s hierarchy of power has changed dramatically over the past recent decades. Students’ engagement with institutional governance has been integrated into university’s daily operations. This study will place specific importance on individual experiences with students’ will and power to initiate purposeful actions in their universities, and incorporate these experiences into the existing scholarly literature. The results

will be of interest to academic community, institutional leaders, individual academics, and policymakers.

I will interview (including focus group) 8-10 students per institution from several universities in China. The aims of the interview/focus group are to gain individual perspectives on personal experiences with student participation and initiatives in regard to university decision-making. The interviews will take approximately forty-five minutes, to a maximum of one hour, at a convenient time and location for the participant.

I would like to assure you that (1) research participation is voluntary and students are under no obligation to participate; (2) choosing to participate or not will not affect grades, class standing, or relationships, etc.; (3) the student advisors are not conducting the study and will not be informed of who has agreed to participate and who has not, nor will they have access to data. This study has been reviewed and received ethics approval through the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board.

I would appreciate discussing this research and valuable opportunity with you. If you are interested in participating, please contact me by telephone or via email.

Sincerely,

Siyi Cheng.