THE ROLE OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

Inherited from the American tradition of lay boards and first introduced into the public higher education system in the 1920s, the board of trustees in Chinese public universities has, over time, played a changing role, from being an autonomous top governing body, to being manipulated by government officials, to being completely removed from institutional governance structures. After China adopted reform policies in the late 1970s, boards of trustees were reintroduced in some public universities. However, higher education regulations and ideological influences have given the board an ambiguous and elusive role, little known to those both outside and inside the university sector.

This thesis investigates the role, function and structure of boards of trustees in Chinese public universities. By examining the policies and operations of these boards, the study aimed to identify whether and how these boards facilitate interaction between universities and their external stakeholders in the overall national context of adaptive institutional change. Following a qualitative approach, the study gathered data from document analysis, a national survey of 40 board secretariats, and semi-structured interviews with secretariat staff of 37 institutions. The study found that boards of trustees can be found in 84 public institutions. Predominantly
composed of members from industry and government, the boards mainly serve as a medium for fundraising and a conduit for university–industry collaboration in teaching and research. The relationship between an institution and its board members is ostensibly interest-oriented and can even involve economic and personal gain. The board is essentially an advisory body, albeit its role in giving advice is very limited. The many challenges associated with board operation and functioning suggest that adaptive governance, which is characteristic of the Chinese party-state, has had both positive and negative impacts on the board. This thesis advances our understanding of the Chinese board through interlocking political, social, and educational dimensions.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

China’s reform and opening-up policies that were initiated over 30 years ago have ushered in a new era for China, politically, economically, and socially. The party-state led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has since demonstrated remarkable resilience by means of “continuous adaptive institutional change” (Dimitrov, 2013, p. 4). This change is also salient in the field of higher education. Once shaped in a way that it would serve the new socialist country when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, China’s higher education system began to take a different approach as the Chinese leaders opted for “Western conceptions of education”, considering universities “essential for modernization and economic development” (Mohrman, 2008, p. 30). Perhaps the most prominent feature of this Westernized reform would be granting increased autonomy to higher education institutions (HEIs) as a result of decentralization of administrative and financing responsibilities from the central government to HEIs. The government wanted to release HEIs from excessive government control and encourage societal stakeholders to be involved in the operation of HEIs. It was in this context that boards of trustees began to emerge in public universities (Huang, 2002).

This thesis investigates the role of the board of trustees in Chinese public universities. By examining the policies and operations of the Chinese boards, the study was designed to identify how a Western concept like the board of trustees was adapted in the Chinese higher education context and whether and how these boards facilitate interaction between universities and their external stakeholders.

1.1 Creation of boards of trustees and their functions

The board of trustees (dongshi hui or xiaodong hui, in Chinese, for both public and private institutions) is relatively new to public HEIs in China. Although boards were one of the major governing bodies for many universities before the CCP founded the People’s Republic of China in 1949, by 1952 the communist government dissolved all the boards of trustees and the State
became the sole funding provider and manager of universities. In 1978, the same year when China introduced the reform and opening-up policy, Jinan University in Guangdong Province was able to convene its first board meeting since the Cultural Revolution, during which the university’s board had been dissolved (see http://dsh.jnu.edu.cn/introduction.html). ¹ This ushered in a new era for boards of trustees to develop in public universities. Over the years, the government issued a number of policies that aimed to “change the management system of higher education” (Ministry of Education, 1985), to “develop varied forms of co-funding” (Ministry of Education, 1993), and to “expand cooperation between industry, university, and research institutes” (Ministry of Education, 1997). As more universities sought support from various social forces, more boards were created. In 1989, the University of International Business and Economics became the first university that was affiliated with a line ministry to have a board (see http://www.uibe.edu.cn/uibeV12/gaishu/jianshu.htm). In 1994, Chongqing University became the first university that was affiliated with the Ministry of Education to have a board (China Education Daily, 2004). By 2010, over 200 universities had set up an administrative council or board of trustees, according to Fan Wenyao (Fan, 2010), Vice Director of the National Center for Educational Development and Research.²

It should be noted, however, that the board of trustees in Chinese public universities does not usually assume the governing role associated with the board of trustees in a Western university. In terms of the role and functions of the Chinese boards of trustees, Du and Jin (1997) described them as “guidance, supervision, coordination, and fundraising” boards (p. 12). Based on the composition of the boards, Du and Jin (1997) listed three types of boards: (a) guild-like boards, mostly common for universities affiliated with a particular ministry,³ (b) local boards, usually with the provincial governor or party secretary as chair of the board and representatives of local enterprises sitting on the board, and (c) a combination of the previous two types, mostly common

¹ This public university has traditionally received considerable financial support from overseas Chinese.

² It is not clear whether the number cited by Fan (2010) included private institutions.

³ Most ministry institutions have now been merged with national MOE (Ministry of Education) institutions or integrated into provincial systems as a result of reform in the 1990s and early 2000s that aimed at improving efficiency.
for universities affiliated with the Ministry of Education. Z. Wang (2007) commented that with rare exceptions, where a board may have very limited power to make certain governing decisions, boards in public universities are at most a medium for building external relationships, for setting up industry-teaching-research cooperation, and for raising funds. She compared them to a contact point connecting university foundations, alumni associations, the government, and enterprises. Based on their functions, Fan (2010) classified the boards of trustees in China (including private and public universities) into three types: the collaborative board (which means universities collaborate with enterprises whose representatives sit on the board in order to obtain social support including funding support); the supervisory board (which means the board provides advice and oversight with regards to university development); and the decision-making board (which means the boards of private institutions and a few public HEIs can make important decisions such as appointing the president). It appears that boards of trustees in public universities usually assume a collaborative and supervisory role, rather than being a decision-making governing body. However, there is a lack of knowledge on the precise nature of their role and how this role is fulfilled.

1.2 Understanding the term “board of trustees”

Chinese universities have their own ways of translating their dongshi hui (or xiaodong hui) into English, such as “governing board”, “board of trustees”, “board of directors”, and “directorate”. “Governing board” is a bit misleading because it implies that these boards in public universities are a key governing body, which is usually not the case; “board of directors” tends to be confused with the notion of a board of directors in the business world where board members are investors; the term “directorate” is ambiguous because it is not specific enough in the higher education context. This study uses the term “board of trustees” to translate the Chinese dongshi hui for a number of reasons, even if most of the boards in Chinese public universities do not have the same governing power as their Western counterparts. In his article on higher education governance reform in China’s Guangdong Province, the Hong Kong-based Professor Ka Ho Mok interpreted the Chinese dongshi hui that were emerging in public institutions as “boards of trustees”. The board of trustees as a governing body for private HEIs was first institutionalized through a regulation in 1997 and then through legislation in 2002.
trustees” (Mok, 2001, p. 139). By law, private institutions in China are required to have a *dongshi hui*, which Chinese higher education experts Ruth Hayhoe and Jing Lin referred to as “board of trustees” (Hayhoe & Lin, 2011, p. 395) in their study of Chinese private universities. Also, the term *dongshi hui* was mentioned for the first time in a national policy document, the *National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020)*. In a review article of this document by Professor Gu Mingyuan, who is “one of China’s outstanding educators and leading specialists in comparative education” in the modern era (Hayhoe, 2006, p. 261), *dongshi hui* was translated as “board of trustees” (Gu, 2010, p. 305).

Historically speaking, in 1920, the first *dongshi hui* of a national public university in China’s higher education history was established. It was modeled after the Board of Trustees of Columbia University in the United States and had similar governing authority (M. Shi, 2010). The status of *dongshi hui* was recognized in China’s education legislation of 1924, which was formulated at a time when American influence was very strong (Hayhoe, 1996). Since then, *dongshi hui* or *xiaodong hui* has been the standard term for this body in Chinese universities, despite drastic changes in board composition and power under different regimes. The term is also the traditional and modern Chinese translation for the American board of trustees. It is obvious that, at least literally, the two terms *dongshi hui* and “board of trustees” correspond to each other, although they have different connotations in the two higher education systems.

For the purpose of this study, the board of trustees is an umbrella term used to refer to a lay board, at least partially made up of members from outside the university, that is, non-academic stakeholders such as the government, intermediary bodies, and the various social sectors, that serves as a governing, advisory, or supervisory body to the university at the institutional level. This use of the term does not include academic boards, such as the Senate, if their main responsibility is to decide on academic matters. This working definition will prevent confusion about the different connotations associated with boards of trustees for different higher education institutions in different jurisdictions; at the same time, it will be inclusive enough to include bodies serving a governing or advisory/supervisory function but using a different name (e.g., Board of Regents in the U.S., University Council in the U.K, and Board of Directors in Denmark). In the Chinese case, only boards going by the name of *dongshi hui* or *xiaodong hui* (and *lishi hui* in rare cases) are the subject of this study.
1.3 Statement of the problem

Although scholarly literature has outlined the role of boards of trustees in public universities in China, there is a lack of literature and systematically collected empirical evidence on how that role is played out. Most Chinese literature on boards is focused on the contexts under which they were introduced into the higher education system (e.g., Huang, 2002; X. Shi, 1996), the benefits of having a board (e.g., W. Wang & Tang, 2007), current barriers for boards to perform effectively (e.g., Q. Li & Liao, 2010; Xiaodong Zhong & Chen, 2004), or suggestions for future directions (e.g., Du & Jin, 1997; Huang, 2002; Q. Li & Liao, 2010). These studies give a general description of the development of boards of trustees in China’s public universities; however, they offer limited understanding of boards because their analyses are usually based solely on policy or institutional documents and therefore there is little empirical evidence regarding how the boards function, how they interact with the university administration, how the board members (internal and external) interact among themselves, and their impact on the university. Moreover, these studies are usually evaluative in nature from an outsider’s point of view and therefore the perspectives of those who are directly involved in the functioning and operation of the boards are missing. The literature can therefore be seen as primarily prescriptive and philosophical rather than focusing on what these boards actually do. There are some single-case studies (e.g., Ye, 2006; X. Zhang, Ren, & Chu, 2004) that give more in-depth analysis of a particular board, looking at the history and composition of the board and its impact on the institution, yet still they do not capture the overall development of boards nationwide, and the perceptions of those who are directly involved in board matters have not been adequately investigated. On the other hand, universities which have a board very often do not publicly disclose relevant information about their boards, such as board meeting agendas or names and biographies of board members. To put it simply, as a new addition to the organizational structure of higher education institutions since the opening-up and reform initiative was launched in 1978, the Chinese public board still largely remains unknown or hidden in terms of its role in the institutional governance structure.

This study seeks to explore the role, function and structure of boards of trustees in Chinese public universities as well as their impact on the university in the overall national context of adaptive institutional change. In contrast with previous studies which usually relied on document analysis, this study attempts to understand the role of the board from the perspectives of those who are directly involved in board matters such as university administrators (i.e., board
secretariat staff) and academics doing consultative work for policy makers. A main research objective is to explore the role of boards through the subjective perceptions of those individuals who are directly involved with day-to-day operation of boards. It also investigates the origin and developments of public boards of trustees in China’s higher education history since the 1920s, identifying the uniqueness of Chinese boards in the application of this Western concept, an emblem of adaptive institutional change. The ultimate goal is to understand the conditionality for the board to play its expected role within the current, unique higher education governance context in China. Specifically, the study asks the following questions:

▪ Which universities have created a board and in what contexts?
▪ How does the board contribute to the work of the university?
▪ What benefits do board members obtain from their participation?
▪ What are the challenges associated with operating a board?
▪ What is the relationship between the board and the university, as well as its stakeholders such as the state and society?

This study also collected and analyzed descriptive data on the current developments of boards of trustees in public institutions, such as the number of public HEIs that have established a board, their institutional types (e.g., affiliated with the Ministry of Education, with another ministry or national bureau, or with the provincial government), board composition, and board charters. There has been little research on the development of boards in public HEIs. Statistics on the number of boards and their compositions have been either confusing or incomplete. First of all, there has been confusing data on the total number of boards. Z. Wang (2007) mentioned that some researchers who assembled statistics a few years ago found that there were about 200 public universities that had set up a board. She did not give the source for such statistics. Fan (2010) pointed out that over 200 HEIs had a board; however, he did not specify how many of these institutions were public universities. He did not cite the source for that figure, either. Yet as early as 2004, there were already more than 200 universities that had set up boards or similar units (Jiang, 2004), and this number was cited by J. Chen and Gong (2007). Again, Jiang (2004) did not give the source for the figure he cited. Presenting a different figure than Jiang (2004) and published in the same year, an article by Xiaodong Zhong and Chen (2004) mentioned that “currently, more than 100 regular HEIs (including private universities) have set up boards of trustees” (p. 33), the same figure that Yuehong Fu (1999) gave in 1999. Judging from the
publication dates of these articles and the figures they cited, verification of these figures is necessary. Second, not every institution that has established a board publicly acknowledges this fact or posts board-related information on the institutional website. There is no nation-wide association of boards that could provide relevant data, either. Confusing and incomplete data are misleading and provide little reference information that could be used to discuss the development of boards in public universities. Therefore, it was necessary to gather reliable statistics on boards, such as the year when a board was created, board member demographic information, and board charters, as a context for this study. Most importantly, this information provided an important foundation for the researcher in terms of deciding how to sample participating boards.

The research questions were partly conceived in light of the researcher’s observation of an interesting phenomenon. Chinese public universities, which are governed by the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the Party Committee (a characteristic Chinese dual governance framework), have created the so-called board of trustees which is a typical governance arrangement of the Western liberal tradition. This phenomenon raises questions about the role and function of boards in the Chinese political, social and educational context, and what, if any, meaningful role the board is playing. Based on a conceptual framework inspired by governance theories in the political science and educational fields, the main research questions were formulated and research methods were designed.

The study drew on a variety of data sources to address the research questions. First, publicly available documents, such as policy documents, MOE websites, institutional websites, newsletters, and news reports, were consulted to arrive at a general understanding about current board developments in Chinese public universities. Individual HEIs were also contacted to confirm if they had created a board. Second, a survey of board secretariats was conducted to collect information on board composition, board member selection processes, operation of the boards, and board charters. Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with board secretariat staff to investigate further the operational aspects of the boards, university–board relationship,

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5 Under the Chinese Higher Education Research Society which is an affiliated unit of the Ministry of Education, there used to be a Branch Society for Research on Boards of Trustees. The branch society convened a national conference attended by about 20 member institutions in 2009. Since then, there seems to have been no activity hosted by this society and it has been literally non-functional, according to the author’s personal communication with a former vice-president of the Society during 2012 and 2013.
and challenges associated with running a board. Academics who were involved in the consultation and drafting processes of the National Guidelines 2010-2020 were also consulted in order to understand the policy that encourages the development of boards in the National Guidelines.

1.4 Significance of the study

This study was proposed and conducted at a time when boards of trustees were increasingly recognized as an important mechanism to improve Chinese public universities. The National Guidelines 2010-2020, which were released in July 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2010a), for example, underscored the necessity for HEIs to extend collaboration with social sectors, and the document urged HEIs to “find proper ways to establish an administrative council or board of trustees for each college or university so as to develop enduring mechanisms for HEIs to obtain the public support and supervision they need” (Gu, 2010, p. 305). Encouraging as it was, the policy document did not define what was meant by the term “board of trustees”, nor did it specify how boards could support and oversee universities within the current governance structure, which is a presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the University Communist Party Committee. This study, therefore, sought to investigate these fuzzy concepts by drawing on primary sources. It addresses some of the key issues related to university–board relationships in particular, and university governance in general. Rather than treating the board as an isolated and independent educational structure, the study examined the board in the broader terrain of political and social complexity. Theoretically, the study advances the conceptual understanding of the nature of university governance in China. Practically, the study provides universities and policy-makers with insights on how to make use of the boards to better serve higher education, in addition to a general understanding about the development of boards in China’s unique university governance context.

In July 2014, almost a year and half after data collection for this study was completed, the Ministry of Education issued a regulation document for the boards of trustees in regular HEIs. The document elaborated on the many aspects of the boards that coincidentally this study was investigating. Therefore, this study provides a timely point of reference for the Chinese boards prior to this regulation being put into effect in September 2014.
1.5 Overview of the dissertation

This dissertation is composed of seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the topic of this dissertation—the board of trustees in Chinese public universities, what is known and what is not known about it, and the organization of the dissertation. Chapter 2 lays the foundation for this study. It reviews governance structural changes of Chinese public universities, at both the system and institutional level, since the first public board was created some 90 years ago. Such a long span of time is necessary to understand the rationale for introducing a Western (or American, to be precise) liberal governance practice into China, the subsequent destiny of the public board in general as well as the boards of some universities in particular, and the political, social, and educational milieu that shaped the development path of the public board under the Nationalist regime and the Communist regime. Institutional responses to governance changes through reaching out to societal stakeholders are then presented. The chapter provides a context for where the public board was and is situated.

Chapter 3 constructs a conceptual framework for the study. It first draws on the theory of adaptive governance from political science to explain the particular overarching governance approach in Communist China. It then elaborates on two constructs—civil society from sociology and the stakeholder society from the field of higher education—to examine how developments in the two domains have impacted the creation and operation of public boards. Both a global perspective and the Chinese context are examined. Bearing in mind that the board of trustees is a borrowed concept from the West (the U.S. in particular), the chapter then constructs a conceptual framework based on the U.S. model, by developing an ideal type for the Chinese public board. The ideal type assumes that the role of the board is conditioned by the dynamic relationship between the party-state, the civil society, and the stakeholder society, all of which are subject to the overall adaptive governance framework.

The fourth chapter explains the research design and methods used in the study. It introduces the methodological framework, data collection methods for the three phases of the study, recruitment processes and participation status, and data analysis protocols. Finally, the limitations, as well as the significance, of the research design are outlined.
Research findings and analyses are presented in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 presents findings from the first two phases of the study, including preliminary data collected from public sources (e.g., institutional websites) and questionnaire responses from board secretariats, following the order of questions in the questionnaire. Chapter 6 reports findings from interviews with board secretariat staff which were the last phase of the study. It highlights salient themes regarding the role, as well as the operation, of the board. The conceptual framework that is constructed in Chapter 3 provides a foundation for the analysis of findings in these two chapters.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides discussion and a conclusion to the thesis. It discusses the findings and analysis presented in the previous two chapters by triangulating the findings from all three phases of the study. Based on the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3, the role of the board is revisited and evaluated under the current political, social, and educational context in China. The chapter also takes a closer look at the new regulation document on public boards, comparing it with findings from this study. Then the chapter evaluates the possibility for the public board to play an effective role in the future. Lastly, some future research directions are identified regarding the board of trustees for higher education institutions in China.
Chapter 2
The Historical, Political, and Educational Foundations for the Board of Trustees in China

The creation and proliferation of board of trustees among public HEIs is closely linked to the decentralization reforms that have taken place in China over the past 30 years. As universities have been compelled to come out of the shield of protection once provided by the government, they have gained more autonomy in choosing approaches that they deem beneficial to their development, while at the same time confronting the demands and uncertainties of a market economy and various market forces. This chapter serves the purpose of investigating the Chinese board of trustees from its historical, political, and educational foundations so that the current role of the board of trustees can be better appreciated. It has five sections. Given that the Chinese board of trustees (dongshi hui) originated from concepts of governance emerging in the West, the first section of this chapter briefly reviews the concept of the board of trustees in its place of origin in Europe and its transfer to the U.S. and back to continental Europe. The second section looks at how the board was introduced to China’s public universities in the early 1920s (when American influences were strong) as well as its changing status in the Republican era (1912-1949). The third section introduces the policy contexts under which boards of trustees were maintained, abolished, and reintroduced into public higher education since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Both system and institutional governance models are examined. The fourth section of this chapter focuses on institutions’ responses to the changing environment in governance by adopting innovative approaches, strengthening ties with societal forces being one of them. Finally, a summary of this chapter is provided, analyzing the unique Chinese context in which this study is situated.

2.1 The board of trustees in the West

Creating a board of trustees for universities is a Western concept. The practice of an external authority appointing board members first started in Italy in the 14th century (Hatton, 1990). A committee made up of citizens took over governance from students. This practice coincided with the 16th century Reformation theories of John Calvin, who advocated lay persons’ involvement in governance as a necessary mechanism for social control of social institutions (Kerr & Gade,
This governance idea later spread across Scotland and travelled to American colonial colleges. The use of lay boards can be seen as part of the whole Protestant reformation against unified top-down governance, as in the Roman Catholic church, to local control of church governance by the presence of lay boards, a core principle in the Protestant non-conformist tradition which was dominant in U.S. history.

Lay boards in American universities have experienced shifting trends. Kerr and Gade (1989) gave a brief account of the development of lay boards. During the colonial period, American colleges experimented with creating a board of lay persons to oversee the institutions, sometimes with another board or senate dealing with internal academic matters. Before the Civil War, some chartered public universities incorporated a single lay board for institutional governance and this tradition has been followed ever since without fundamental changes. Over the years, observed Kerr and Gade, religious influence in boards has dropped significantly. Boards have accorded power to and expanded the power of non-lay persons (such as faculty and students) representing different constituencies on the board, adopting a shared governance model for the institution. They are also more subject to influence from other interested parties (such as buffer bodies and the media). No matter how lay boards are currently structured in American public universities, the trustee system, with its emphasis on public oversight, institutional autonomy, and the social connections of higher education institutions, seems to be the pillar of institutional governance.

Though lay boards were a European invention, they became an integral part of American higher education and had not been viewed as a key element of university governance within many countries in Europe until recently. In the higher education systems in Continental Europe, as represented by France and Germany, the traditional view has been that the main goal of institutions is to produce knowledge and therefore institutions and the professoriate should be free from social influences in their pursuit of knowledge (Neave, 2001). Also in the continental model, universities were essentially a part of the state with professors holding the status of civil servants and university buildings belonging to government. Under this framework, oversight from social constituencies would not be acceptable. Since the late 1970s, however, higher education systems following the Continental model have begun to involve more outside stakeholders in institutional advising and even governance, bringing in better connections.
between the university and social and industrial sectors (Clark, 1978). This trend has been particularly noticeable in the past decade or two as states retreat from a direct governing role and institutions gain more autonomy. The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), for example, are introducing new acts that would allow external stakeholders to be integrated into the institutional governance structures (Musial, 2009). In Denmark, external stakeholders have taken up a majority of membership on the governing board and the university president should be one of them (Degn & Sørensen, 2015). To further strengthen the role of market forces and to reduce direct state intervention, some Landab (federal states) in Germany allow universities to set up boards of trustees whose roles vary from being an advisory body to a decision-making body, thus expanding university–society linkages (Pritchard, 2006). In both the Nordic and German cases, representation of external stakeholders on the board of trustees is emphasized. The Netherlands has gradually made the university–society connection prominent by introducing a series of education acts in 1970, 1986 and 1997, as a result of which a new governing body—the Supervisory Board—was put in place (Maassen, 2002). This board is expected to “represent external interests and stakeholders in the intra-university governance processes” (Maassen, 2002, p. 29). Public boards in Italy, as prescribed by the new law of 2010, now have stronger presence of independent members recruited from domestic and international pools of experts who are expected to help institutions align their educational offerings with societal interests (Giovanna, 2013). The idea of a lay board is also picked up by some Eastern European countries, such as Estonia and Hungary, where the collapsed socialist governments had maintained monopoly in governing HEIs and where a culture for public participation in governance has yet to develop (Morgan & Bergerson, 2000).

Although boards of trustees in different jurisdictions assume different functions and follow different appointment procedures in institutional governance, the fundamental idea of having a board drawing on external stakeholders is to provide public oversight and protect the institutions. However, the roles and functions of boards are not without controversy. For example, in the U.S. where boards of trustees have long been an established governing body in the country’s higher education history, boards were often attacked in the early 20th century for interfering with the institutional administration and treating universities like business corporations, whereas in the 1970s they were criticized for having failed to adequately carry out their responsibilities for a long time (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). Even today, when shared governance has become the
norm, there are still doubts about trustees’ disinterested stance, their ability to understand higher education, their commitment to it, and their effectiveness (Duderstadt, 2000). Similar suspicion about boards of trustees can also be found in Germany (Pritchard, 2006), France (Musselin & Mignot-Gérard, 2002), Australia (Marginson, 1997; Moses, 2007), and Britain (Knight, 2002). In Austria, for example, the divide between the academic governors from within universities and the corporate governors from industry or professional fields has caused serious mistrust and finger-pointing, in addition to issues of political and ideological influence on board member selection (Meister-Scheytt & Scott, 2009). Doubts about boards may not necessarily mean that boards are in crisis; they do, however, raise questions about board performance.

2.2 The board of trustees in China’s Republican era (1912-1949)\(^6\)

2.2.1 The rise and fall of the board of trustees in public universities

Compared with the long history of universities in the West, the first “new” university in modern China dated back to the year of 1895 with the creation of Beiyang gongxue, a public university (Editorial Committee of the History of Beiyang University, 1991). The board of trustees did not have a place in China’s formal higher education system until the early 1920s.\(^7\) Early reforms of higher education in the Republican era, such as those carried out by Cai Yuanpei, the first Minister of Education and later Chancellor of Peking University, set forth the notion of a senate (pingyi hui, in Chinese) as the top governing body, made up of the president, the provost, deans and two professors from each discipline (Shaoxue Liu, 2007). For internal governance, he

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\(^6\) The feudalist Qing Dynasty of China collapsed in 1911. The Republic of China was officially established in January 1912. The years from 1912 to 1916 were generally known as the era of Yuan Shih-k'ai, which was marked by political experimentation. The ensuing era of Peking government (1916-1928), also known as the Beiyang government, was characterized by warlordism. From 1928 to 1948, the Nationalist government under the Kuomintang (KMT) regime became the legitimate government. (See Fairbank & Twitchett, 1983, for the history of the Republic of China.) The Republican era ended in 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party established the People’s Republic of China.

\(^7\) Some missionary colleges and universities had boards before the board of trustees for a national public university was created at Southeast University, but they were outside of the government-administered higher education system (see Lutz, 1971).
followed the German model of professoriate rule, and for relationships between the university and the society, he was inspired by the French model of insulating the university from political or societal influences and advocated that universities should not participate in political activism (Hayhoe, 1996).

Since the 1920s, American influences on China’s education began to grow with an increasing number of students choosing to study in the United States. American educators, such as John Dewey and Paul Monroe, were also invited to come to China and disseminate their educational philosophy. In the meantime, many Chinese students who had completed their studies in the U.S. returned to China and took up leadership and faculty positions in universities, bringing in American influence in management and curricula. In 1920, Guo Bingwen, who obtained a doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University, became the first president of the newly founded National Southeast University (in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province). Impressed by the American trustee system and societal sponsorship, he created the first board of trustees in a Chinese national university (M. Shi, 2010). Major responsibilities of the board included budgeting, planning, nominating the president, whose nomination would be submitted to the Ministry of Education for approval, and managing endowments. The board of trustees as a required governing body for national public universities was legislated in 1924, when the Ministry of Education issued *The Order for Regulations on National Public Universities* (Beiyang Government, Ministry of Education, 1991). The American-style board had deliberative authority over planning, budgeting, and important policy issues. Resolutions of the board needed to be submitted by the university president to the Minister of Education for approval before they could be implemented. The board would be composed of: (a) the university president as an ex officio member, (b) member(s) appointed by the Minister of Education from among officers of the Ministry, and (c) selected members appointed by the Minister on recommendation of the board. Academic matters became the responsibility of the senate or *pingyi hui*. The 1911-1925

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8 John Dewey’s visit to China lasted more than two years from May 1919 to July 1921 (see J. C. Wang, 2007, for analysis of Dewey’s contribution to Chinese education). Just one year later, in November 1922, the Chinese government issued *The Order of Schooling System Reform* (Government of the Republic of China, 1922), introducing a credit and elective system which was modelled after that of the U.S. From 1921 to 1926, Paul Monroe visited China five times. The lengths of his stays varied from just a few days to a few months (see H. Zhou & Chen, 2007, for details of Monroe’s activities and influence in China).
period witnessed the increasing impact of American higher education on China in terms of academic traditions and institutional governance (Hartnett, 1998).

Universities at the time were still at a stage of exploring and experimenting with governance practices, trying to give the professoriate more say on academic matters and to separate higher education from bureaucratic administration. Due to very limited and very often disrupted funding from the government, universities had to make use of other resources, such as appointing a warlord to be the Chair of the Board for Wuchang University, or co-investing with banks as in Southeast University, or seeking donations from foreign and domestic foundations (Shaoxue Liu, 2007). Although at the beginning of the Republic, legislation did not specify how university presidents should be appointed, the 1924 Order for Regulations on National Public Universities indicated that the appointment of presidents of national universities resided with the Ministry of Education. After 1927, conflicts intensified between the Nationalist government led by Jiang Jieshi (also known as Chiang Kai-shek) and the rising Communists led by Mao Zedong. The government gradually exerted more control over universities. The University Organization Law of 1929 stipulated that presidents of national public universities be appointed by the central government, and that candidates for presidents of provincial or municipal public universities be submitted by the local government to the central government for appointment (Nationalist Government of the Republic of China, 1929). In this sense, the appointment of the presidents was essentially in the hands of the central government rather than the Ministry of Education; thus universities were subjugated to government bureaucracy. The 1929 legislation did not mention boards of trustees (except for the case of private institutions). Instead, it required public universities to have a university council (xiaowu huiyi, in Chinese) as the top decision-making body, composed of internal members including members selected by all full professors and associate professors as their representatives on the council, all deans and department heads, and the president as the chair of the council. After that, the board of trustees began to fade out in the governance arrangements of public universities.

In the early 1930s, the Nationalist government invited a group of European experts to evaluate the educational system. The government even further strengthened bureaucratic central control by implementing the experts’ recommendations of introducing a common university entrance examination for all public universities and national criteria for faculty appointments, while it disregarded their suggestions about avoiding political intervention in higher education (Hayhoe,
The government also dismissed the Europeans’ idea of creating an advisory body to the Ministry of Education on matters such as appointments of university presidents, curriculum, and institutional differentiation. It should be noted that, obviously wary about unscrupulous emulation of American practices (e.g., the credit system) in the Chinese context, the experts’ report favored the European tradition of centralization, for example, public university presidents being appointed by the Ministry of Education and national universities being financed and controlled by the Ministry.\(^9\)

The report was a crucial move away from the American model, justified on the basis of academic concerns and criteria by the influential European experts. There seems to be little literature on how this reorientation of higher education impacted the functions of institutional boards, but given the shift from the American model of decentralized university governance to the European model of centralized state control, institutions’ autonomy had been undermined. The fact that the government initiated a government-controlled unifying tax structure also led to tighter central control, leaving institutions little fiscal independence that could be used as a weapon to defend their autonomy (Pepper, 1996).

Harnett (1998) summarized the external and internal factors that resulted in the loss of appeal of the American liberal model. Externally, in the context of a strong nationalistic movement, the political and social stability that would nurture liberalism simply did not exist at the time in China. The progressive approach and political neutrality of Dewey, whose lecture tour in China was greatly promoted by prominent Chinese educators such as Hu Shi, Guo Bingwen, and Jiang Menglin, all of whom had received education from Teacher’s College, Columbia University, was at odds with China’s political sentiments. Internally, the American liberal ideal itself, which grew out of the unique higher education context in the U.S., particularly the divide between private and public institutions and the combination of British-style undergraduate and German-style graduate education, made it almost impossible for other countries to emulate. In China, the disconnect between Westernized higher education institutions and locally staffed secondary schools, the superficial imitation of Western practices at the cost of domestic needs, and strong political intervention in academe—all indicated that the Chinese context did not provide a

\(^9\) For details of the reports, see League of Nations’ Mission of Educational Experts, 1932.
nurturing ground for American influences to expand further in China’s higher education system. Modelled after the board of American elite private universities, the Chinese board of trustees obviously did not survive long in the public system and was only retained in private institutions until the Republic of China collapsed in mainland China.  

### 2.2.2 Case studies of some boards of trustees

Some Chinese public universities, nonetheless, maintained at least for some time a board of trustees that emulated the American boards. There has been no systematic analysis of university boards during the Republican era. A look at the history of some universities provides some clues as to what happened to their boards. The first board in a national university was created in 1920 in the new National Southeast University, as a means to raise funds for the new university. There were 17 board members (including Guo Bingwen, the president, who was the mastermind of the creation of the board) and two honorary members (who were provincial officials). All members were at least somehow related to Eastern China’s Jiangsu Province and adjacent Shanghai where commerce and industry were more developed. Members were either distinguished scholars, influential businessmen and entrepreneurs, or government officials (D. Wang, Gong, & Mao, 2002). As the top governing body, the board was charged with approving budgets, nominating the president to the Ministry of Education, and maintaining the private endowment, among other things of importance to the university. However, both Guo and the board were considered by many to be too domineering, constantly interfering with the professoriate. The board was also defiant of the Ministry. Guo was dismissed from the presidency by the government in 1925 and the board was dissolved by the Ministry later that year. For the next two decades, until the Communists took over in 1949, the top governing body of the university (later to be named

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10 Private institutions were required to abide by the 1924 legislation which introduced the board of trustees into the public higher education sector. Although boards of trustees in public institutions were replaced in the 1929 legislation, this legislation did make a reference to private boards which would be dealt with separately by regulations of the Ministry of Education. Later legislation exclusive to private higher education (e.g., *Bylaws on the Board of Trustees in Private Institutions* in 1928, and *Regulations on Private Institutions* in 1929, 1933, 1943 and 1947) all required private institutions to have a board of trustees and set strict rules as to the composition of the board (see Song, 2003, for details on the development of private higher education in the Republican era).
Fourth Sun Yat-sen University and then National Central University) was a university council whose members were almost all chosen from within the university community.

Another public university, Jiaotong University (composed of three campuses located in Peking, Tangshan, and Shanghai), had its first board meeting in Beijing in March 1921. The university was under the administration of the Ministry of Transportation. Composed of 17 members, the board was the top decision-making body, responsible for developing educational guidelines, nominating the president, fundraising, assessing programs, making policies, and so forth (Y. Sheng, Sun, & Ou, 2006). The Minister of Transportation was nominated as the president of the university. Derived from the governance model of American institutions, the board was meant to safeguard institutional autonomy and protect the university from political influence. However, most of the board members (14 out of 17) were officials of the Ministry of Transportation. Their official positions were not stable because there was high turnover of government officials in an era of constant changes in political regimes. Due to nepotism within the Ministry of Transportation, there was also a lack of oversight. By November of 1921, the board simply could not function. With a new regime taking power in May 1922, the new Minister of Transportation dissolved the board and directly appointed a president of his choice. Hostile towards the new president, students started numerous protests demanding the board’s restoration and independence from the government. A number of presidents were appointed consecutively to the university as a result of student protests. The board, however, was never restored.

Tongji University, located in Shanghai, was a private university that transitioned to become a national university. According to the published history of the university (Weng & Tu, 1987), the original board of trustees was the top governing body responsible for appointing the president, budgeting, and program changes. It was composed of 17 members, two of whom were ex officio (i.e., the president and one representative from the Ministry), and the other 15 members were selected from government officials, scholars, and bankers. When the university became a national university in August 1927, the board of trustees surrendered its control of the university property to the government. It then became an advisory body. The president, now appointed directly by the Nationalist government, had an expanded mandate and was responsible for all university affairs. With the university council put in place under the 1929 legislation, the advisory board of Tongji University was obscured and hardly mentioned in the history of the university.
A number of private universities became national universities under various circumstances. Their governing structure was also changed accordingly. For example, the private Fudan University (Shanghai campus) maintained a board until the mid-1940s when it merged with the National Fudan University from the Chongqing campus (S. Wang & Qin, 2005). Board members played a key role in financing the university, such as donating money and land to the university for various purposes (e.g., constructing buildings, financial aid to students). It should be noted that tensions over who should be on the board and who should be the board chair reflected the desires of various stakeholders to control the board and thus the university (Qian, 2005). In another case, Nankai University was a private university from its creation in 1919 to 1946. At the time of its creation, there was controversy over whether political bureaucrats should be recruited as board members, given the fact that they had made donations to the university. Before the university was forced to retreat to China’s southwest due to Japanese occupation, board members were mostly financial supporters of the university and could be categorized into three groups: (a) bureaucrats (some of whom were in charge of national banks and in the finance ministry), (b) indigenous industrial and commercial capitalists, and (c) distinguished scholars, according to the Editorial Committee of the History of Nankai University (1989). The portfolio of the board included recruiting the university president, fundraising, budgeting, and approving and amending the university charter. In 1946, when the university was converted to national status, the board of trustees was replaced by the university council (which was composed of internal members only) as the top decision-making body of the university.

The governance structure of the National Guangdong University (later Zhongshan University, or Sun Yat-sen University) was somewhat unique among all national universities. It was one of the two universities that were created by Sun Yat-sen, the Nationalist leader and founder of the Republic of China. The Nationalists regarded this university as their flagship university. According to D. Wu, Chen and Yi (2006), when the university was created in 1924 it had a consultative council (canyi hui, in Chinese) responsible for fundraising, budgeting, and trust funds. It was composed of internal members (the president of the university and heads of disciplines) and external members (chair of the provincial parliament, governor of the province, chiefs of the provincial educational bureau and bureau of finance, mayor of the city where the university was located, the president of the provincial educational society, and no more than five members who were respected scholars and/or financially capable of contributing to the
university’s development). The president of the university would be chair of the council and convene council meetings. There were other organizations to deal with other university affairs, such as the university council which was the top governing body, the senate (pingyi hui), and the professoriate assembly (jiaoshou lianxi huiyi). After the university was changed to Zhongshan University in 1927, the consultative council was removed. The university’s governance structure was basically a president with the university council as the top governing body.\textsuperscript{11} In 1929, in response to complaints about financial problems as well as calls for improving the university’s recruitment and infrastructure, the Nationalist Central Committee passed a resolution to set up a board of trustees for Zhongshan University consisting of nine members, all of whom were key Nationalist figures including Chiang Kai-shek himself. The board was charged with financing responsibilities, including budgets, property, salaries, capital projects, etc. There is little information available on the board of trustees regarding how it was involved in university governance in later years.

While boards of public universities were usually abolished in accordance with the legislation of 1929, many private institutions had continuous and functioning boards of trustees as was required by legislation for private education institutions until these universities were merged into other public institutions or shut down after 1949. For example, Zhonghua University (now Central China Normal University) was able to maintain its board of trustees from its inception in 1920 to 1949, although there were times when the board was largely dormant (M. Ma & Wang, 2003).

The origin and development of boards of trustees in the West and in China’s Republican era (1912-1949) reveals that the board was clearly an instrument for bringing social forces into the governance of universities. There were no uniform arrangements in terms of board composition, board member selection, and the power delegated to the board or conferred on it. These arrangements were conditioned by the internal as well as external environment. The Chinese public boards during the Republican era had a few distinctive characteristics. First, they were, to varying degrees, imitations of boards of private institutions in the United States. This

\textsuperscript{11} There was a brief period when the top governing body was a commission made up of five people who were special appointees of the government.
phenomenon was probably related to the fact that many of these universities’ creators and leaders at the time were graduates from prestigious U.S. private universities. Impressed with the achievements of American higher education, these people hoped to improve China’s education by adopting the American academic and institutional model. Second, the status of boards was in constant flux as legislation changed in the 1920s. This resulted from the fact that Chinese higher education in its formative years was exploring development paths on the one hand and that there were constant clashes among different political factions and educational philosophies on the other hand. Third, the board of trustees was subject to the political whims of the time. The conflict between Jiaotong University and the reigning regime (i.e., the Ministry of Transportation) over the board issue in the early 1920s demonstrated these political tensions. The board had become a battlefield for control and power, politically and personally. The pillar of public oversight and social connection also seemed to have fallen victim to private interests and advantage, rather than acting in the best interests of the institution (Pepper, 1996). In sum, the Chinese context did not allow for the boards to develop into the same decision-making boards as in the American liberal society.

After the Chinese Communist Party won the Civil War and founded the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the development of higher education took different directions in different periods, often associated with the political ideology at the time. Drastic changes took place at both the system and institutional levels of governance and they impacted the development of boards of trustees in public universities. The next section briefly reviews these adaptive institutional changes which provide the contemporary context for this study of boards of trustees. Particular attention is given to the relationship between the university president and governing bodies as well as the composition and authority of governing bodies during different periods from 1949 to the present.

2.3 System- and institutional-level governance after 1949

2.3.1 The systemic shift to centralization

In 1950, one year after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power, the first National Conference on Education declared that Chinese education should assume the role of “serving
socialism and fostering economic development” (N. Zhong & Hayhoe, 2001, p. 272). With no prior experience in the governance of universities, the CCP introduced the governing and operating practices of its neighboring socialist country, the former Soviet Union, and set up a completely centralized model of university governance. All universities became state-funded and state-run institutions under the direct control of the central government; the administrative systems, pedagogy, and textbooks imitated those of the Soviet Union; the central government established a unitary set of plans covering almost all aspects of the higher education sphere ranging from student enrollment to faculty and staff recruitment, from curriculum to students’ job assignments. The state–university relationship was “one-way and top-down” (R. Yang, Vidovich, & Currie, 2007, p. 579), in the same way as the central government was running the state economy.

This restructuring of higher education following the Soviet model had two implications for the boards of trustees at the time and even for their current development. First of all, private institutions which survived the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists were usually merged into public institutions, thus leaving no legitimate reason for the private board of trustees to exist. In particular, as a result of strong anti-American sentiments and the desire to eradicate all foreign and especially American influences in education, including American-run missionary institutions, the government introduced a policy to take over those institutions, sometimes through weakening the power of their governing boards, such as in the case of Furen University (Harnett, 1998). In 1950, the government issued the Provisional Regulations for Private Higher Education Institutions (Ministry of Education, 1950b), which stipulated that the board of trustees of private institutions had authority to appoint and dismiss the president. Two years later in 1952, the Communist government terminated all boards except the board of Jinan University which was traditionally sponsored by overseas Chinese (but even this board was terminated in 1970 during the Cultural Revolution).

The second implication of the restructuring was concerned with institutions’ relationships with external stakeholders. Under the restructuring, higher education institutions were divided into three types: (a) comprehensive universities (such as Peking University and Fudan University) with science and humanities disciplines, (b) polytechnical and engineering institutions with a few applied science faculties (such as Nanjing Polytechnical Institute which is now Southeast University and South China Polytechnical Institute which is now South China University of
Technology), and (c) specialized institutions (such as teachers’ colleges, foreign language colleges, politics and law colleges, medical colleges, finance and economics colleges, etc.). Many of the newly created polytechnics and specialized colleges were a result of mergers among faculties from comprehensive universities. Also, because of their specialty in one or several disciplines, they were under the direct administration of relevant ministries, or sometimes were jointly administered by the Ministry of Education or the later separated Ministry of Higher Education. For example, Shanghai Jiaotong University was under the authority of the State Commission of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense in 1960, and Tongji University was under the joint supervision of the Ministry of Urban-Rural Development and the Ministry of Construction and Engineering in 1954. In comparison with comprehensive universities that were stripped of disciplines in applied sciences or some specialized or professional faculties, polytechnics and specialized colleges tended to have a history and tradition of close connections with industry and provided graduates to the relevant industry. Guidance and directions from the responsible line ministries apparently had an impact on these institutions. It was not surprising that these universities were quick to take advantage of their ties with industry and expand their influence in education when linkages with industry were promoted in the reform era after 1978.

At the system level, the centralization model that was introduced in the early 1950s remained the dominant model in Chinese higher education for a long time. Even today, the government is trying to find ways of moving away from central control by delegating more coordinating authority to local governments and more autonomy to individual institutions (Ministry of Education, 2013a). The structural changes to institutional types shaped the institutional development path, restricting or expanding their relevance to the world outside of the institution. Compared with comprehensive universities, many of the former specialized colleges and polytechnical or engineering institutions also tended to keep their ties with industry and the ministries in charge of the same industry, even after they were merged with or into other institutions.

2.3.2 The shift to decentralization after 1978

In the late 1970s, with the opening-up policy and economic reforms underway, too much centralized control was then found unfit for a national context where there was an increasingly
open market economy. With regard to higher education governance, the government aimed to relinquish its excessive control over universities and delegate more decision-making power to the institutions themselves (Hayhoe, 1989). In the early 1990s, this objective to change the state’s role was transformed into five reform guidelines, that is, “joint construction, co-operative administration of institutions, institutional amalgamation, transference of jurisdiction, and participation of other social sectors in institution operation” (R. Yang, 2000, p. 322). Under these guidelines, the State assumed a macro-management role and devolved much of its control over universities to the power of provincial governments and the universities themselves. A major move taken by the central government, unprecedented in the history of the PRC, would be the decentralization of financing responsibilities. From the mid-1980s to 1993, the central government reduced funding to universities by 5% per year (X. Zhou, Li, Zhao, & Cai, 2003). Universities therefore had to be entrepreneurial and find other sources of funding, such as charging and raising tuition fees, applying for bank loans, operating their own enterprises, providing training programs, and cooperating with industry (Qi & Chen, 2000; Ross & Lou, 2005). In terms of the procurement and appropriation of educational resources, institutions had gained much autonomy, orienting themselves towards a market mechanism for survival and development.

Perhaps the first formal strategic move to decentralization started with the release of *The Decisions of the Central Committee of the CCP on Reforming the Educational System* in 1985. The CCP acknowledged in the document that the government control of HEIs was too tight and that the HEIs did not have the needed vitality. To change this situation, reform of the educational system was necessary, increasing institutional autonomy and enhancing institutions’ ties with industry, research, and the society in such a way that HEIs would have the initiative and capacity to actively adapt to the needs of the country’s economic and social development. Measures for increasing autonomy mainly included recruiting self-sponsored or commissioned students, adjusting program offerings, collaborating with external units for research and development, creating consortia of teaching, research and industry, and utilizing self-raised funds (Ministry of Education, 1985). This policy document served as the CCP’s endorsement of institutions to make use of market forces and reach out to the broader society and seek collaboration opportunities with enterprises and businesses.
In 1986, another policy document on the management of higher education (National Educational Commission, 1992) further explained how different levels of authorities—the National Educational Commission, departments and ministries of the State Council (China’s cabinet), and provincial governments—should support and encourage HEIs to collaborate with the broader society. The HEIs were allowed to exercise their own power in forming industry-teaching-research consortia with external units (under certain conditions). They could also undertake contracted research projects with external units, provide technical service and consultation to the public, and receive sponsorship and donations from industry. The government also encouraged HEIs to seek funding from different sources rather than depend only on state appropriation.

There was a follow-up of the 1986 policy in 1992 that aimed to deepen reform and further increase institutional autonomy (National Educational Commission, 1998). Under the general principle of “self-balancing”, institutions were allowed to use budgetary and non-budgetary funds at their own discretion. In addition, institutions had the authority to determine their internal organizational structure and personnel on the condition that they had the mandatory offices in place that were required by the CCP’s Central Committee and the State Council. This policy gave institutions the opportunity to set up organizational or decision-making arrangements that they deemed necessary for their own institution, which opened up the possibility of creating a board of trustees for universities.

As a matter of fact, following the South China tour of Mr. Deng Xiaoping, the “chief architect” of China’s reform era, China was more confident and determined than before to embark on the road of economic reform that led to unprecedented openness and drastic reform measures in all spheres of Chinese society. A number of policies in the early 1990s also established a two-level administrative hierarchy, the central and the provincial, with more decision-making and coordination power shifted towards the latter. More institutions were then under the supervision of provincial governments. In the meantime, universities were encouraged to take the initiative to gain support from local governments. An operating mechanism was needed so that the central government could be responsible for macro management and the institutions could have autonomy. Institutions were also expected to start internal management reforms. Additionally, there were specific policies that echoed reforms in the science and technology system of the country. They frequently referred to collaboration with industry in terms of joint programs, graduate studies, joint research projects, co-operative education, technology transfer, service to
industry, and sponsorship from the industry. These ideas and directions were incorporated into *China’s Education Reform and Development Guidelines* in 1993 which revealed the CCP and the government’s blueprint for China’s education until the year 2000 (Ministry of Education, 1993).

If the 1980s could been seen as a time when higher education began to be back on track with tentative reform initiatives, then the 1990s could be regarded as a time during which the higher education system was reshaped and restructured in such a way that it would fit with a socialist market economy. Along with institution merges, reform measures were focused on decentralization in terms of management and funding, which triggered a series of systemic and institutional changes including but not limited to outreach to social forces in funding, teaching, research, and technology transfer. These measures were reinforced by subsequent implementation schemes of the 1993 *Guidelines* and institutionalized into the *Higher Education Law* in 1998 (Ministry of Education, 1998b), the first of its kind since 1949. A modern higher education system with Chinese characteristics began to take shape.

Envisioning the potential for the nation to be revitalized through science and education, policies starting from the late 1990s seemed to have been oriented towards improving the quality of education as seen from their emphasis on research and innovation. A National Science and Education Leadership Group was created in 1998 and headed by the Premier, with the Vice Premier, a number of ministers, and presidents of the Chinese academies of sciences and engineering as members of the group. Again in 1998, the *Action Plan for Vitalizing Education Toward the 21st Century* reiterated the theme of innovation and development, calling on institutions to integrate with research institutes and industry for “one-stop” collaboration from project proposals to applications (Ministry of Education, 1998a). A later document also stated that a system of oversight from society should be established to improve institutions’ self-discipline and self-management (Ministry of Education, 1999). However, there was no specific reference to what this system would look like and how it would work.

Entering the new millennium against the backdrop of the massification of higher education, new policies kept the focus on quality and innovation, as was demonstrated by the six grand projects and six initiatives in the *Action Plan to Revitalize Education 2003-2007* (Ministry of Education, 2004a). Two specific notions in the *Action Plan* warrant attention. First, on the macro management level, a democratic decision-making process was emphasized, characterized by
research on preliminary plans, consultation and debate, public notice and hearing, and democratic oversight. These protocols appeared to be more concrete than those proposed in the 1993 *Education Reform and Development Guidelines* which referred to democratic policy decision-making in more abstract terms such as through consultation with and evaluation by experts in education and other fields. Changes in terminology reflected the propensity of the government for a more deliberative rather than an arbitrary decision-making model. Though this was mostly seen at the macro level, it might influence decision-making protocols at the institutional level in the long run, possibly involving a wider range of stakeholders in institutional decision-making.\(^{12}\) The second important notion was the permission for public vocational schools to establish a board of trustees or council that would be composed of representatives from trade or industry. This was perhaps the first time a national policy document had openly suggested the creation of boards or councils of a similar nature for the public system, albeit it did not mention the mandate and functions of such a board. In addition, the policy encouraged participation and oversight from the community, students and parents.

The latter half of the first decade of the new millennium witnessed another turning point for higher education in China. After wide consultation with central government agencies, provincial governments, scholars, institutional leaders, and the public domain (China Education and Research Network, 2010), the CCP Central Committee and the State Council issued the *National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020)* in 2010. With improving quality as the core mission for the next 10 years, the *National Guidelines* stated that system reform, including reform in governance arrangements, should be the key to creating a modern education institution. Exploration and experimentation with reform measures was encouraged.

In this policy document, several important notions could have implications for the public board of trustees in HEIs. First, the document mentioned that consultation practices and decision-making processes should be improved; second, selection and appointment processes for

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\(^{12}\) As a matter of fact, after 2010, the government did require the 73 MOE-affiliated institutions to carry out pilot practices to improve institutional decision-making processes. According to the inspections of the Leading Group for the National Educational System Reform, generally speaking, a decision-making framework (system) is basically in place; there is wider participation and consultation from faculty, students, experts, and staff in the decision-making processes; and there is increased transparency (Ministry of Education, 2012a).
university presidents should be reformed; third, universities should create their own university charters according to laws and comply with these charters in running the university; fourth, long-term mechanisms for social support and oversight should be sought after and improved; fifth, models of close collaboration between university and industry/enterprises should be encouraged; and sixth, which is of special importance to this study, institutions could create a board of trustees or an administrative council and search for a mechanism that would enable the board of trustees to play an active role. Obviously, the National Guidelines attached importance to collaboration with industry, social oversight, consultation and consultation protocols, all of which could be the potential dimensions of a board of trustees. The National Guidelines also encouraged pilot studies and experiments with the board of trustees as part of the reform to create a modern higher education system. These objectives showed that the government expected institutions to strengthen ties with a variety of stakeholders, especially external stakeholders.

In November 2012, the Ministry of Education issued the Implementation Guidelines for Advancing Governance by Law, which clearly stated that institutions should have autonomy in self-management in accordance with law (Ministry of Education, 2012b). The creation of institutional charters and important policies should be transparent and follow wide consultation processes with internal and external stakeholders. Decision-making mechanisms should allow academic councils and boards of trustees to play a role in policy making. Higher education institutions should actively expand collaboration with society and the participation of social forces, drawing on social resources in terms of policy consultation, teaching and research, risk management, and student internship and practices. Key concepts—such as the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the CCP committee, the president’s administrative meetings (xiaozhang bangong huiyi, in Chinese), academic councils, faculty and staff assembly, and university charters—once again became the key working areas for the year 2014, according to the Minister of Education (2014a). Specifically, the Ministry would work on the composition and decision-making protocols for the board of trustees.

So far, this chapter has reviewed the systemic shift from centralization to decentralization as the Chinese state devolved more decision-making power to individual institutions for a wide range of responsibilities, from fundraising to academic governance to personnel management. The creation and development of boards of trustees in public universities coincided with this move towards decentralization, but obviously bore Chinese characteristics. At the institutional level,
governance arrangements from 1949 to the present also shifted, sometimes towards more central control and sometimes towards more democratic participation. These shifts, as the next section will show, were very much responses to different political directives and movements that changed over time, and they became the foundational frameworks for institutional governance, frameworks that have implications for the public board.

2.3.3 (Political) Foundational frameworks for institutional governance

Except in the case of Jinan University in Guangdong Province, the board of trustees was virtually non-existent in China’s higher education sector for nearly 30 years (i.e., 1952–1978). During this period, the government introduced a series of changes in terms of governance frameworks at the institutional level. The following section reviews these changes with the aim of revealing the government’s traditional mechanisms for institutional governance. This review provides a context for understanding the current development of boards in public universities. In particular, it delineates the power relationship between the university president, the party committee, and other collective bodies in institutional governance arrangements.

For a short period after the Communist Party came to power, university governance followed the arrangements in the Republican era, in which the university council was the top governing body. This was changed soon after the revolution, in 1950, and since then there have been seven major frameworks for institutional governance (see Table 2.1). In 1950, the government issued the Provisional Regulations for Higher Education Institutions (Ministry of Education, 1950a). This was the first document defining the internal governance structure of HEIs that the CCP and the Chinese government had ever made (L. Chen & Yang, 2009). The document stipulated that institutions adhere to the presidential-responsibility system, in which the president, appointed by the central Ministry of Education, would represent the institution, be responsible for all matters related to teaching, research, and administration, be responsible for political study among all faculty, staff, students and campus police, appoint and dismiss personnel, and approve the resolutions of the university council. The university council was under the leadership of the president, who should also be the ex officio chair of the council. The council would be comprised of the president, vice president(s), provost, vice provost, chief administrative officer of general affairs, chief librarian, deans, department chairs, four to six representatives from the
employee union, and two student representatives. The mandate of the council was as follows: a) reviewing teaching plans, research plans, and performance reports from each department and research group; b) passing budgets and final accounts; c) passing important policies and regulations; d) discussing and deciding on major student award and penalty matters; and e) discussing and deciding important reform matters. Since the president approved resolutions passed by the university council, he or she could be regarded as the ultimate authority for all decision making.

**Table 2.1 Institutional Governance Framework 1949–Present**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Framework</th>
<th>Authority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>University council</td>
<td>The university council as the top governing body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Presidential-responsibility system</td>
<td>The president as the ultimate authority for all decision-making and leader of the university council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>University council under the leadership of the university party committee</td>
<td>The party committee as the leader of the university council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>University council responsibility system headed by the university president under the leadership of the university party committee</td>
<td>The party committee as the leader of the university council which was a collective decision-making body with the president responsible for implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Unified party leadership</td>
<td>Actual authority residing in the workers and military propaganda teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Division of labor among the president and vice presidents under the leadership of the university party committee</td>
<td>Party committee superseding the administrative power of the president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Presidential-responsibility system</td>
<td>The party relieved from “managing all” and focusing on party development and ideological/political work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-</td>
<td>Presidential-reasonability system led by the university party committee</td>
<td>The president subject to party leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To some extent, these two governance arrangements before and after 1950 followed the governance traditions of the Republican era because they were not much different from the arrangements prescribed by the Nationalist government’s *University Organization Law* of 1929.

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13 In China, all trade unions are affiliated with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the only union federation in China (Bai, 2012). The federation is under the direct administration of the Secretariat of the CCP Central Committee. In universities, all employees of the institution, including senior administration, academic administrators, faculty, and staff, are members of the same trade union.
The university council, although made up of only internal members of the university, exercised responsibilities similar to the American board of trustees in terms of finances and important policy matters, but it did not appoint the president and its decisions were subject to the president’s approval.

Two ensuing nation-wide ideological movements in the 1950s that determined to reintroduce and reinforce the CCP’s authority resulted in a change of direction in the internal governance of higher educational institutions. Party cadres began to take up institutional posts to advance political work, and party control over institutions was restored (Hartnett, 1998). A directive in 1958 from the CCP Central Committee and the State Council pointed out that all higher education institutions should be subject to the party’s leadership, that the previous presidential-responsibility system was not suitable, that university councils under the leadership of the university party committee should be adopted, and party cadres should be dispatched to institutions to take charge of political work, administrative work, and production-related work (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 1958). However, institutions at various levels did not follow this directive strictly and so it was almost not implemented at all (L. Chen & Yang, 2009).

A major change in institutional governance framework took place after the CCP’s Central Committee approved the *Provisional Working Regulations for Higher Education Institutions under Direct Administration of the Ministry of Education (Draft)*, also known as the *Sixty Articles*, in 1961. Still intended to strengthen the party’s leadership and its unity with non-party forces, this document prescribed a university council responsibility system with the university president as head of the council under the leadership of the party committee (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 1984). The university council was a collective leadership unit. Its responsibilities included: a) planning teaching, research, production, facilities, campus management, and political work; b) important issues within departments; c) student recruitment and graduates’ job placements, professional development and promotion of faculty; d) formulating and revising university-wide policies; e) reviewing and passing budgets and final accounts; and f) other important issues. The president, appointed by the State as the executive head of a university, represented the institution, chaired the university council, and was charged with the operation of the institution. The president should bring forward important issues to the council for discussion and resolution, and was responsible for implementing board resolutions.
The president and vice president would take the posts of chair and vice chair of the council respectively. The Sixty Articles were put into trial use in more than 220 higher education institutions, including the MOE and other line ministry affiliated institutions, and provincial and municipal institutions.

Although the mandate of the university council in the Sixty Articles was similar to that of the 1950 regulations, the council membership proposed in the two policy documents was obviously different. The Sixty Articles added the secretary of the party committee to the council, clearly in an effort to exert party influence. Other members would include the president, vice president(s), provost, chief administrative officer for university affairs, department heads, professors, and other members deemed necessary. Unlike the provisional regulations issued in 1950 that clearly stated four to six representatives from the employee union and two student representatives were to be included on the council, the Sixty Articles did not specify who could be “other members”. Although the document required that no less than one third of council members be from non-party forces, it seemed that the membership of the council was not as inclusive as in the 1950 document. Nominations for membership were to be put forward by the president after consultation with the university party committee and submitted to the Ministry of Education for approval.

Compared with the 1950 regulations, the Sixty Articles of 1961 obviously emphasized the authority of the university’s party committee over the president and the university council, as well as over all other institutional units in university governance. The party committee was the leadership core of the university and the university was under the unified leadership of the party. In addition to being charged with political propaganda-related work within the institution, the party committee was also supposed to lead the university council, discuss personnel arrangements\textsuperscript{14} and make recommendations to the university council and higher level party units. While the party committee was designated to be at the institutional level, branch party committees should also be created at the departmental level, as well as among faculty, staff, and students respectively. Party units also led the Youth League, employee union, student unions, and other units.

\textsuperscript{14} The original text is “discuss” (taolun, in Chinese), but it can be assumed that the party actually regulated and controlled personnel arrangements because the party had unified leadership for university affairs. In a later policy document of 1978, the term “discuss” was replaced by “make decisions” (jueding, in Chinese).
and other non-party organizations. The leadership of the party in governance was institutionalized and this has continued until today with the exception of two time periods, 1966–1978 and 1985–1989.

If the 1950 regulations on HEIs were considered to have retained some of the governance traditions of the Republican era, then the *Sixty Articles* marked a clear departure from those traditions, even moving away from the Soviet model. The party’s control over educational institutions was emphasized and the party became the real decision-making authority for institutions. The new governance framework superseded the Soviet-style presidential-responsibility system. The *Sixty Articles* is generally regarded as showing Chinese characteristics in education. Even Mao Zedong, Chairman of the CCP’s Central Committee at the time, commented that finally China had something of its own (Yi Fu, 2006). With the demise of private institutions in 1952, the board of trustees had virtually disappeared from China’s educational scene.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) played havoc with higher education and brought utter chaos to the system; even the party committee was attacked and ousted for some time during the period. Institutions were supposed to be under the party’s unified leadership which superseded the administration and other governing bodies; however, in reality, it was the workers and military propaganda teams for Mao Zedong thought and the revolutionary committees that controlled the institutions (Hao, Long, & Zhang, 2011).

The year 1978 marked the beginning of a restoration and reform era for China. In October 1978, the Ministry of Education issued the *Provisional Regulations for National Key Higher Education Institutions (Provisional Draft)*, which was a revision of the 1961 *Sixty Articles*. This new policy document (Ministry of Education, 1984) stated that universities should be under the leadership of the party committee with a division of labor among the president and vice presidents, meaning important issues related to teaching, research, and ancillary services needed to be discussed and decided by the party committee while the president was responsible for implementation by delegating respective work to the vice president(s). The university council was removed and an academic council was put in place. The new system caused confusion in the responsibilities of the president and the party committee and in many instances the party committee superseded the administrative power of the president (Ouyang, 2011).
Another document from 1985, *Decisions of the Central Committee of the CCP on Reforming the Educational System*, indicated a major shift in institutional governance structure. The document stated that a presidential-responsibility system should be gradually adopted (Ministry of Education, 1985). Conditions permitting, some universities could establish a deliberative body, that is, a university council with a small number of respected members and chaired by the president. The document did not specify its membership, though. A faculty and staff representative assembly should also be set up. The authority of the party committee should be limited to party development and political work while providing support to the president. Starting in 1985, the new presidential-responsibility system was piloted in a number of universities. The main initiatives included setting up mechanisms for consultation, oversight, decision deliberation, administrative directives, and democratic management. A democratic decision-making process was established (Hao et al., 2011) with the following protocols: (a) the president put forward tasks for tackling important issues; (b) advisory bodies or special task forces put forward resolution schemes through research; (c) administrative leaders compared schemes and made initial decisions, which would be discussed among all faculty and staff (and students, if the issue was student-related); (d) a final draft was made according to feedback and then brought to the university council for discussion and consensus; and (e) finally the president issued the formal policy document.

There is some literature on how this presidential-responsibility system was implemented in individual universities. For example, according to S. Xu, Deng, Ji, & Wang (1987), in Hubei University, one of the institutions that piloted the new policy, advisory bodies included the university council, research offices, the academic council, etc. The president would be held accountable to, and overseen by, higher level party officials and government. Oversight of the president and his or her administration could also be done through the university-level party committee and the faculty and staff representative assembly. The president should also convene meetings with student representatives regularly to listen to suggestions and feedback. In Jilin University (Z. Wu, 1988), the president would convene and chair the university affairs meetings of an institutional decision-making body that included the president, vice president(s), and party representatives (secretary, vice secretary and discipline secretary of the party). Similarly, Tongji University also positioned the university affairs decision-making body as its top governing body with additional members including the provost, chief officer for general affairs, university
secretary, and president of the employee union. Final decisions were made by the president (Tongji University, 1987). Similar arrangements were also found in Chengdu University of Science and Technology (J. Wang, 1988). Jinan University in Guangdong Province held university affairs meetings as well. The university created an advisory committee that was made up of experienced experts, professors and retired senior cadres (J. He & Liu, 1985). All these universities seemed to have embraced the idea of the presidential-responsibility system and reported improvements in governance.

The above-mentioned examples show that the presidential-responsibility system emphasized oversight from party committees, the faculty and staff representative assembly, and, in some instances, advisory committees. The oversight mainly came from within the university, although the president and his or her administration were also subject to supervision from higher level party committees and governments. Other than that, none of the reports or institutional documents cited above indicated or suggested a role for oversight from social forces. Jinan University at the time already had a board of trustees, but obviously this board was not considered an oversight body during this period. This may be attributed to the fact that the 1985 policy document that initiated the presidential-responsibility system did not refer to social forces in terms of monitoring university administration and providing suggestions or advice to the administration.

The presidential-responsibility system introduced in 1985 strengthened the president’s decision-making power. The party committee was delegated a supportive and oversight role and its leadership role was weakened, the impact of which was reflected in the Tian’anmen incident of 1989 (Ouyang, 2011). Realizing that the party should retain its supreme control of universities’ political and ideological orientation to prevent capitalist penetration, the CCP’s Central Committee introduced the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee soon after the incident, obviously with the aim to strengthen the power of the party committee. At the same time, it also emphasized the necessity of separating party and administration functions (Han, 2008). Piloting of the former presidential-responsibility system should not be expanded. Institutions which had achieved good results under the former presidential-responsibility system could continue to explore operations under that system, whereas institutions that did not do well in the old system should shift to the new system. Whichever system was to be adopted, party organizations should remain at the core of
institutional leadership. The new system was institutionalized in a CCP Central Committee document in July 1990. Since then, that system gradually became the standard governance framework in HEIs across China. It was reiterated in legislation, *The Higher Education Law*, which was passed in 1998 and has been in effect until the present.

According to the *Higher Education Law*, the party committee of the institution led by the party secretary is the political embodiment of the institution. It should ensure that the institution implements the policies of the CCP and that the institution serves the socialist cause. It supports the president to carry out his or her obligations independently. The party committee also makes decisions on key issues concerning the institution’s reform, planning and fundamental management principles to ensure successful training of highly qualified personnel. Theoretically, this law grants universities the status of independent legal entities. The university president is the legal representative of the institution. He or she is responsible for the institution’s overall teaching, research and administration, such as making development plans and detailed regulations, appointing and dismissing faculty and staff, and making and implementing annual budgeting plans. The academic council of the institution decides on programs, curricula, and research plans. It also assesses teaching and academic awards. This law does not specify the membership of the council. Delegations of the faculty and staff will attend the faculty and staff assembly, which is supposed to be the platform for their democratic participation in and oversight of governance to protect their rights.

A fundamental issue in Chinese higher education governance remains unsolved, that is, the delineation of responsibilities between the president and the party committee (as represented by the party secretary), within the dual governance framework of the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee. Scholars and universities (Y. Chen & Qi, 1999; Xiong, 2013; Deguang Yang, 2010) have indicated concerns about the blurry line dividing responsibilities between these two offices or between the party and the executive, a phenomenon that is not just confined to HEIs but can also be found in other fields such as in the economy and the legal system (H. Chen, 2003). The *Chinese Communist Party’s Organizational Regulations in Regular Higher Educational Institutions* that were passed in 1996 stressed the party’s dominance in university governance. This has been viewed by many as “a major setback for academic freedom and the vitality of the universities” (Saich, 2011, p. 139). Even though the *Regulations* were revised in 2010 by adding some details on the collective decision-making
procedures for the party committee, there was still ambiguity as to how the presidential-responsibility system should work. For a few years after the *National Guidelines* were issued in 2010, the Ministry had failed to develop an implementation protocol for the framework, despite repeated announcements that it was working on such a protocol (Ministry of Education, 2010b, 2011b, 2012c, 2013a).

It was only in October 2014 that the long-anticipated implementation guidelines for this foundational institutional governance framework were issued by the CCP’s Central Committee (News of the Communist Party of China, 2014). Compared with previous documents, this new regulation document gave a more detailed description of the division of powers between the party committee and the university president, as well as streamlining the decision-making processes within institutions. Similar to earlier documents, the party committee still remained as the leadership core and the ultimate decision-maker for major issues of the university. What was impressive about this document is that it elaborated on the responsibilities of the party committee, in 765 words in bullet form.\(^ {15} \) They included, among other things, grasping the development direction of the university, making decisions on important policy issues and overseeing their implementation, supporting the president in carrying out his or her duties independently and responsibly, and discussing and making decisions regarding foundational management systems and important matters with regard to reform, development, stability, teaching, research, and administration of the university, as well as organizational structure, cadre appointment, and human resource planning and policies. The party committee would also lead the employee union, the Youth League, the student unions, and the assembly of faculty and staff representatives. The party committee should discuss matters and make decisions collectively. Unprecedentedly, the document also specified the size and membership of the party committee and its standing committee, as well as the quorum for convening meetings and passing resolutions. The president would be responsible for implementing the decisions of the party committee and carrying out duties related to teaching, research, and administration of the university. The document emphasized communication, coordination, and consultation between the party committee and the senior administration when drafting and approving policies. Evidently, this publicly available

\(^ {15} \) By contrast, the *Higher Education Law* of 1998 used only 166 words in one paragraph to describe the responsibilities of the party committee in very abstract terms.
document resolved some of the mysteries around institutional decision-making processes. It is still too early to tell what impact it will have on institutional governance in practice.

Governance arrangements in private HEIs, on the other hand, are distinctly different from those of the public institutions. Though private (minban, in Chinese, or people-run) higher education is not the focus on this study, it is worthy of a reference here to prevent misunderstanding. Social demand for higher education had greatly contributed to the emergence and expansion of private higher education (Su, 2012) since the early 1980s. Categorized as private non-enterprise units (Yan & Lin, 2010), private HEIs usually have a board of trustees as their governing body, which is charged with hiring and firing the president, budgeting, and other decision-making powers regarding important policies, according to the Implementation Guidelines for the Law on Promoting Private Education (Ministry of Education, 2004b). The president exercises authority over administrative and academic matters autonomously in accordance with laws and regulations. He or she proposes the internal organizational structures to the board and seeks approval from the latter. Clear as they may sound in policy documents, these governance arrangements are often murky and self-defeating in reality as a result of confusing division of power, contentious family-management style, and ambiguous property ownership, among other things (Song Liu, 2009; Yan & Lin, 2010; G. Zhou & Xie, 2007). For example, the founder (or sponsor) of the institution could be the board chair and the university president at the same time, which makes it difficult to delineate responsibilities between the board and the executive.

So far, this section has reviewed significant fundamental changes in the institutional governance framework of public HEIs since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It has paid particular attention to the distribution of power and responsibilities among different actors, such as the party committee, the president, academic councils, faculty, staff, and students, under changing political situations. The review reveals that university governance has been generally under the leadership of the CCP except for a brief period (1985–1989). Decision-making in institutions has been subject to the party’s guidance and supervision. Under this framework, there does not seem to be a decision-making role for a public board in the American tradition.

In summary, changes in university governance in China have reflected the global trend of decentralization and recentralization in terms of the state–university relationships that can be observed in some East Asian and Western countries (Mok, 2002), meaning that the state is
devolving more decision-making power to institutions but at the same time it is assuming a more robust regulatory and monitoring role. Mok (2002) maintained that this shift in state-university relationships could also “be a mechanism for tightening control of the periphery” and serve to “strengthen the state’s capacity to foster particular interests” (p. 271), a phenomenon that Mok discussed in more detail in his later work (Mok, 2012). In the case of China, provincial or local governments have gained more power as funders and coordinators of HEIs. Another particularity of China’s state–university relationship lies in the prevalent officialdom and bureaucratic administrative arrangements, which are informal channels of control as opposed to a formal vertical and horizontal bureaucratic hierarchy (L. Wang, 2010). For example, senior university officials (e.g., presidents and party secretaries) are appointed by the government and even the CCP’s Central Committee for key universities, and they are held accountable to officials of higher rank rather than to other stakeholders of the university. Non-transparent and very often by short notice, the appointments of presidents and party secretaries tend to arouse suspicions that they are closely related to ideology and power struggle of senior government and party officials (Leung & Sharma, 2015).

That being said, policy changes in the last 30 years nonetheless point in the direction of delegating more autonomy to institutions while the central government remains the key strategic policy-maker and provincial governments assume more responsibility for coordination and support. Democratic participation in decision-making has apparently been gradually encouraged, drawing on expertise and feedback from a wider range of stakeholders, including government officials, scholars, industry, and the general public. At the institutional level, policy changes have been conducive to facilitating institutional autonomy. Recent developments in the creation of university charters have also marked another major step towards governance on a legal basis, in addition to the Higher Education Law of 1998. The Ministry of Education had approved 32 charters by September 2014, since the first collection of charters was approved in November 2013. For universities that have already established a board of trustees, it is required that their university charter should clearly define the role of the board, its composition, and procedural rules (Ministry of Education, 2011a). Therefore, the ways in which university charters describe the role and responsibilities of these boards warrants attention. Similar to the policy-making process at the macro level, institutional decision-making is required to move towards a more
democratic model with participation from both within and outside of the university, which may create an environment that encourages members on the board of trustees to get involved.

Under the changing policy environment, institutions strive to adapt to new directions and competition in higher education. They are pushed to the market and have to cultivate various means in order to gain and maintain a competitive edge. Situating Chinese public universities in the context of global higher education developments, the next section of this thesis reviews in what ways universities have responded to policy changes. On the one hand, they have become more innovative, drawing on resources from the society by developing stronger relationships with the social sector. On the other hand, as they are more integrated with society, they have become subject to more public scrutiny and are held accountable to stakeholders.

2.4 Institutional responses

This section reviews how institutions have responded to the changing policy environment, which is another foundational dimension for understanding the development of Chinese boards.

2.4.1 The innovative university

China’s decentralization of higher education resembles the general trends of higher education reforms in Europe. Most governments in European countries have reduced direct control of universities; they have encouraged universities to become “strategic actors” (Paradeise et al., 2009, p. 92; Teichler, 2004, p. 20). Universities are then confronted with a wide range of challenges, such as meeting the requirements of performance indicators, accommodating enrollment increases, competing with each other for resources, and improving efficiency and effectiveness. Clark (1998) referred to the challenges facing universities as “demand overload” (p. 140), that is, “demands on universities overturn their capacity to respond” (p. 129).

Universities are responding with innovative means to sustain and develop themselves. Being socially engaged would be one of the most prominent approaches. Tornatzky (2005) summarized a list of strategies that some innovative American universities have adopted so as to be externally engaged: establishing research partnerships with industry, engaging in knowledge transfer activities, setting up local entrepreneurial businesses, providing technical assistance, training and
education to industrial companies, and partnering with state and local agencies. Geiger (2006) advanced the understanding of American universities’ responses to external demands one step further, focusing on how they have enhanced their economic relevance through university–industry connections. Their efforts have included an array of internal strategies such as investing in infrastructure, promoting interdisciplinary research, and reconfiguring organizational units to facilitate linkage, as well as external strategies such as acting on the needs of external agents, governments and corporations alike. Similarly, after analyzing case studies of innovative universities in Europe, Clark (1998) observed that entrepreneurial universities were willing to come out of the ivory tower and reach out to collaborators outside of the university, engaging in, among many other things, contract research or education, consultancy, setting up industrial contacts, and building science parks.\(^\text{16}\) He also identified “third-stream funding sources” which, in addition to the first-stream source of government funding and the second-stream source of funding from research councils, universities had strived to gain as they intensified their efforts to expand their funding base. These third-stream sources, such as industrial companies, campus services, alumni, and philanthropic foundations, have indeed greatly expanded universities’ funding bases. Entrepreneurial universities would regard the diversification of funding sources as an indication of more institutional autonomy (Clark, 1998).

In China, as universities were pressured to rely less on the central government, both in management and in funding, they were learning to develop in a competitive environment increasingly influenced by market forces. In terms of engaging the universities “externally”, from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, there was a noticeable increase in university–industry linkages, which was mainly attributed to decreased grants from the government and the government’s supportive polices that encouraged these relationships (Xiwei Zhong & Yang, 2006). Technology service contracts were a major source of income for universities. Another important source was university-affiliated enterprises, such as university-affiliated factories for students to obtain internship experience, joint business firms with other enterprises, or technology development firms created by universities or departments (Xiwei Zhong & Yang,\(^\text{16}\) Clark (1998) preferred to use the term “entrepreneurial” rather than “innovative” to describe universities which were responding to environmental demands in non-traditional ways, because he maintained that the former “points more powerfully to deliberate local efforts, to actions that lead to change in organizational posture” (p. 4).
Even when the Chinese government increased its investment in higher education later when it pledged to develop 100 or so world-class universities, universities continued with their entrepreneurial and innovative spirit and expanded their ties with society, and actively engaged in research and development (R&D) projects and various knowledge transfer activities (Hong, 2008; L. Lu, 2008).

As was shown in Section 2.3 on policy development, innovation has become the major theme for China to improve its global competitiveness and universities are expected to be key actors in promoting innovation. In May 2012, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the *Implementation Schemes for Promoting the Innovation Capacity of Higher Education Institutions*, commonly known as the “2011 Project” (Ministry of Education, 2012d). The “2011 Project” aims to build four types of collaborative innovation centers that are geared towards the sciences, cultural heritage, industry, and regional development respectively. Among them, centers oriented towards industry will become an important R&D and technology transfer base for universities to collaborate with and support industry and enterprises. Local government will also be a major actor for centers towards regional development, coordinating and integrating resources to facilitate collaboration between universities and local industry. More than 300 universities have been engaged in some form of collaborative innovation in accordance with the *Implementation Schemes* (China Education Daily, 2013a). By the end of 2013, fourteen national collaboration centers had been set up and they served as a constructive mechanism for deeper industry-teaching-research collaboration (Ministry of Education, 2014a).

The innovation schemes further demonstrate the necessity for universities to reach out to societal stakeholders, which is likely to involve members on the board of trustees. For example, in 2010, at the inception ceremony of the board of trustees for the China University of Political Science and Law, the Assistant Minister of Education commented that, using the board of trustees as a platform, the university could adjust its teaching, research, and talent training according to social demand, gain more social support, facilitate and promote knowledge transfer through industry-teaching-research collaboration with board members and their organizations, and promote national and regional development (China Education Daily, 2010). Another example of innovation would be the state laboratory in optoelectronics of Huazhong University of Science and Technology, which stimulated strong connections between board members and the university (Hayhoe & Li, 2011).
The various innovative means for universities to cope with their “demand overload” illustrates the importance of reaching out to industry and society at large. In other words, universities need to increase their connections with society. In the West, the board of trustees is right at the interface between university and society (Jones & Skolnik, 1997). In the Chinese context, where HEIs are considered part of the administrative bureaucracy of the government, especially in terms of the appointment of university presidents and party secretaries, what does the board of trustees do that is related to the core missions of universities, such as teaching, research, talent training? Who are the members of the board and how do they support the universities? These are fundamental questions that are central to the Chinese higher education system, and yet little research has been conducted on these issues.

2.4.2 The university under public scrutiny

Currently, the notion of the board of trustees appeals to a number of academics who regard it as a mechanism to improve governance (e.g., M. Li, 2005; T. Lu, 2010; Z. Sheng, 2009; Xiong, 2002), especially at a time when university presidents and other senior administrators have gained unprecedented decision-making power as a result of increased institutional autonomy. New problems have arisen due to the concentration of power and the lack of oversight. For example, one problem is the overuse of administrative power in ways that interfere with the academic affairs of the university. Administrators in Chinese universities are given administrative ranks comparable to government officials; therefore, the administrative hierarchy in a university tends to misappropriate educational resources and to override the professoriate’s academic discretion (Si, 2010; H. Xu, 2010). Another problem is the lack of accountability on the part of senior administrators, which is likely to lead to problematic decision-making and abuse of power such as wasting resources, indiscriminate borrowing from banks and unbridled expansion of construction (Dongping Yang, 2011). There has also been a noticeable increase in “scandals” and crimes committed by university senior administrators, including bribes and academic corruption (Guangming Daily, 2009). Recent cases (China Education Daily, 2013b) of highly publicized corruption in two key national universities (both of which have a board of trustees) are perhaps just the tip of the iceberg. Because of its supposed oversight function, a board of trustees is expected to be able to provide some checks and balances that will serve to counteract unbridled power. Unfortunately, little empirical literature exists as to whether the
board has the legitimacy to assume this oversight role, and if so, whether this role is fulfilled and how.

A recent development in bringing in social forces for oversight is the advocacy for third-party involvement in education quality evaluation. The third party could be professional bodies, independent organizations, or industry (Ministry of Education, 2014a). The relevant policy indicated a willingness on the part of the government to devolve more authority to social organizations. This will be again putting the institutions under public scrutiny.

2.5 Summary

Over the last 90 years since the board of trustees first came into existence in China’s public institutions, it has undergone drastic shifts in terms of its perceived legitimacy as a governance mechanism in the Chinese political context. The repeated embrace and removal of the board suggest that the existence of public boards, as well as their functioning, is contingent upon the political, social, and educational environment at specific time periods. Historically speaking, the Chinese public board was directly influenced by the American trustee system. The introduction of boards in the national higher education system in the early 1920s imitated the American model. The public boards at that time were not much different from their American counterparts, charged mainly with budgetary and fundraising responsibilities. Many board members themselves made substantial financial contributions to the institution where they served. With the increase in American influence, boards became institutionalized through education legislation, and yet their functions were frequently breached due to political and ideological conflicts. With regime change in government, public boards were abolished in the legislation of 1929, although boards in private institutions were retained until 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party took over. As the new government took central control of higher education, private boards were dissolved and there were virtually no boards of trustees until the reform era after 1978. From a political perspective, the public boards of trustees thrived at a time when state control was weak under the Peking government (1916–1928). By contrast, it appeared that neither the Nationalist government (1928–1948) nor the Communist government (1949–), both of which were authoritarian one-party regimes, liked the idea of maintaining a board of trustees for public universities which were mainstream higher education providers. The author would contend that
this was probably due to the fact that boards’ tendency to gain independence from government control was likely to be interpreted by the reigning government as defiance of its authority or even as political confrontation, such as in the case of Shanghai Jiaotong University in 1922. As for the Communist China of the Mao Zedong era (1949–1976), universities like many other organizations (e.g., enterprises, hospitals) were under the government’s direct control and were treated as an arm of the government. Such a governance model did not allow room for a board of trustees to exist.

From an educational perspective, the introduction of boards in the 1920s was meant to improve HEIs in China at a time when they were lagging far behind their peers in other industrialized countries. Similarly, a turning point for the role of boards of trustees arrived in the opening-up and reform era when the Communist government strived to promote the economy and well-being of the nation. Education was once again regarded as the key for achieving that purpose. The government pledged to focus on macro management, delegating more autonomy and fundraising responsibilities to institutions. Since the beginning of the reform era, a series of policies have been introduced to that effect. These policies have encouraged universities to expand ties with social forces. In addition to funding, many of the core missions of the university, such as talent training, graduate employment, research and knowledge transfer, were pushed to interact with the broader society under the banner of collaboration. Universities reacted to this changing policy environment and devised innovative means in order to survive and compete. A space was provided for the idea of boards of public universities to be revisited. These bodies used the same terminology as the American board and the board in the Republican Era, and yet perhaps had different missions and functions, given the existing prescribed institutional governance framework, be it the presidential-responsibility system or a presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee. The immediate goal was to improve higher education.

Also in an educational sense, since 1999 and especially since the National Guidelines 2010–2020 were issued, policies clearly have emphasized the importance of sustained relationships with non-government stakeholders as a long-term mechanism for oversight in addition to collaboration in order to ensure that the public institutions serve the public good. Although the National Guidelines only referred to this very briefly without elaboration on what that mechanism should be and how it should function, it nonetheless pointed in the direction of
involving more stakeholders in university governance other than the government and senior university administration. In the public school system, parents had already taken part in many K–12 schools’ management through the use of parents’ councils as an advisory and oversight body (Ministry of Education, 2012e). For advanced vocational institutions, a board or council made up of representatives from government, industry and enterprises was encouraged (Ministry of Education, 2010c). By contrast, it may take a considerable amount of time to devise a social oversight mechanism for public universities, partly because it would involve a higher level of administrative hierarchy and have wider implications for the political and social governance structures. Small steps have already been taken at least at the policy level, as is shown by the policy review earlier in this chapter, towards gradual democratic participation in governance, transparency in decision-making, and rule of law instead of ad hoc arbitrary directives.

The historical, political, and educational foundations of the board of trustees have shaped the context in which this study on Chinese public boards is situated. These foundational elements are embedded in one another, constituting a unique Chinese context that is very different, perhaps even fundamentally different, from the Western liberal context where the board originated and was institutionalized. Therefore, the study of Chinese boards should take into consideration the Chinese context when conceptualizing and investigating the research questions. The next chapter constructs a conceptual framework for the study based on the unique Chinese context.
Chapter 3
Conceptualizing the Board of Trustees in the Chinese Context

The use of a lay board for governing HEIs originated in Western societies. The underlying assumption for the board in the U.S., as Chapter 2 has shown, is to provide oversight from the public and safeguard institutional autonomy. This use of a lay board which has external stakeholders on it has also been taken up by some Continental European countries where institutions were traditionally under the state apparatus, with varied assumptions and objectives. Clearly, the creation of boards and their role in institutional governance is closely associated with the existing political, economic, social, educational and even cultural environment. Boards in Chinese public universities, from their first appearance in the 1920s to their current development, have also been conditioned by the Chinese context, both in the Republican era and under the current regime. Therefore, this study on the role of the Chinese board is conceptualized by taking into consideration the unique Chinese context and drawing on governance theories and constructs in this context. However, it should be mentioned again that the original use of boards of trustees in China was modelled after the American example, whose influence on Chinese higher education is still significant (Mohrman, 2005). It is also necessary to use the American board as a point of reference, if not for comparison per se.

This chapter develops and describes a conceptual framework for this study. The framework is informed by the American model of the university governing board. It takes into consideration the Chinese adaptive governance model from a political science perspective, using the model as an overarching frame for conceptualizing the board in the Chinese context. It also incorporates the social and educational conditions for the board to exist and operate from the global and Chinese perspectives, by drawing on two constructs, civil society from sociology and the stakeholder society from the field of higher education.
3.1 A governance model in China: Adaptive governance

Chapter 2 reviewed the historical, political and educational foundations of the Chinese public board. It was noted that system-level governance (e.g., relationships between the center, the provincial government, and individual institutions) and institutional governance structures (e.g., the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee) have been conditioned and influenced by macro-level policies. Therefore, discussion of the role of boards cannot be separated from the particular political governance approaches adopted by the party-state. This section draws on adaptive theory from political science to frame, understand, and analyze the particular governance arrangements in China.

In sharp contrast to conventional theories of political science which use Cold War-oriented, dichotomous models in addressing the governance issues of Communist nations, Heilmann and Perry (2011a) proposed a theory of adaptive governance to explain contemporary governance practices in China. Conventional wisdom held that, with rapid economic development, the authoritative Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would come to its demise (like many of its Eastern European counterparts) and China would transition towards a liberal democracy. However, Heilmann and Perry (2011a) observed that the CCP has demonstrated remarkable resilience and has surprisingly weathered successive serious challenges, politically (e.g., the Tian’anmen incident in 1989), economically (e.g., the financial crisis in 1997–1998 and the economic downturn since 2008), and socially (e.g., the SARS epidemic in 2003 and large-scale social unrest in 2009). China has also achieved great economic prosperity and become more integrated into the global knowledge economy. Heilmann and Perry pointed out that while communist systems—Soviet, Eastern European, and Chinese alike—share fundamentally the same institutional structure, such as a planned economy and a centralized propaganda system, the CCP seems to be much more flexible and resilient. Realizing that current conventional theories did not give a satisfactory answer as to why the CCP is different from other communist parties, Heilmann and Perry attempted to identify the roots of this resilience by examining the revolutionary path of the CCP (1927–1949) and the first thirty years of the People’s Republic of China (1949–1976).
Heilmann and Perry (2011a) argued that the unusual resilience of the CCP results from its adaptive governance mechanism. Unlike many other collapsed Communist party-states which used a rigid top-down governance approach, Chinese leaders, from Chairman Mao to his successors in the reform era, have adopted adaptive governance methods which are inherited from Mao’s revolutionary experience that “conceives of policy-making as a process of ceaseless change, tension management, continual experimentation, and ad-hoc adjustment” (p. 3), as a result of lessons learned from protracted, grueling battles for survival and development. This is the “root” of contemporary governance practices, and it sheds light on the understanding of the current “solutions, institutions, and processes at work in China today” (p. 5). This governance approach allows for “decentralized initiative within the framework of centralized political authority” (p. 7) and encourages innovative bottom-up knowledge generation and practices.

Adaptive governance (including both formal and informal institutions and norms), Heilmann and Perry (2011a) argued, has helped Chinese leaders weather adversary political and military environments from the CCP’s formative period until the present day and has contributed to China’s current economic power and global competitiveness.

Central to adaptive governance is the guerrilla policy style that was developed from Mao’s experience of guerrilla warfare during which Mao and his followers were constantly confronted with uncertainty and thus became fully aware of “the advantage of agility over stability” (Heilmann and Perry, 2011a, p. 11). Guerrilla policy-making operates on the basis of a number of assumptions such as:

- Policy-making should be kept fluid by trying to avoid binding constraints (e.g., personal pre-commitments or legal-contractual obligations) so as to retain political initiative and room for policy revision…. [A]dvice derived from theory and abstract models is not to be trusted; instead, new methods of action are derived from pilot efforts and practical experience in concrete setting…. [S]trategic decisions are the preserve of the top leadership; yet operationalization and implementation require substantial latitude for local initiative and independence. (p. 13)

This guerrilla policy style nurtures creativity and improvisation because, as Heilmann and Perry (2011a) have noted, it requires policy makers to
keep the core strategic objectives firmly in mind, yet be as agile and pragmatic as possible in choosing tactical and operational means…[to] tinker with a full range of available operational tactics and organizational approaches, be they traditional, non-traditional, or even foreign. (p. 13)

Obviously, guerrilla policy-making regards flexibility and uncertainty, rather than institutions and rule of law, as the norm for policy development. It is in sync with traditional Chinese philosophy embodied in classic works such as the Book of Changes and the Art of War which, Heilmann and Perry (2011a) observed, advocate “fluid, dialectical, and tactical approaches to managing ubiquitous tensions and contradictions” (p. 15).

Adaptive governance is achieved through a guerrilla policy style and it is not just confined to the CCP’s long march to power. Because China is a party-state, this governance mechanism actually permeates various policy arenas, such as health care, legal reform, sub-county governance reform, media control, public surveillance, and center-local relationships, as is shown in subsequent chapters in Heilmann and Perry’s volume (2011b). Take the governance of civil society for example. Dillon (2011) compared the approaches that the government took towards the voluntary sector during the Maoist era and the reform era. She observed that the approaches during the Maoist era were “flexible”, “political” (as opposed to “legalistic”), and “exploited ambiguity” (p. 144), while largely relying on provisional means. During the reform era, although there has been some progress towards regulations and legalistic frameworks, policy ambiguity is still employed through unpredictable, campaign-style “rectification reviews” and is used “as a strategic resource and source of power” (p. 157). In addition to clear-cut rectification campaigns, the CCP’s adaptive governance style towards civil society can also be “blind-eye governance—a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’” attitude” (Weller, 2012, p. 83) that allows for tolerance when the CCP is uncertain as to how to deal with an issue.

Adaptive governance is also salient in the higher education policy area. Chapter 2 of this thesis has reviewed the political foundations for system- and institutional-level governance arrangements in China since 1949. Changes in the foundational frameworks for institutional governance (eight frameworks in the course of over sixty years) show that the government has been experimenting with different approaches to governance, given the particular political and social contexts at the time. For example, the presidential-responsibility framework that was in
practice between 1985 and 1989 (before the Tian’anmen incident) was introduced at a time when the CCP and the government were more willing to open up and speed up reform. However, the Tian’anmen incident made the leaders realize that the party should retain control of HEIs, and consequently, the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee was swiftly installed thereafter; it was institutionalized in the *Higher Education Law* of 1998. This framework continues to be the cornerstone of institutional governance (Ministry of Education, 2014a). Another example would be the incremental movement towards democratic participation in institutional governance. This is reflected by the introduction of and improvement in consultation protocols, faculty and staff involvement (through general assemblies), and student voices. The academic council, which started as a vague governance structure in 1978 and which was still ambiguous in the *Higher Education Law* of 1998, has now been institutionalized in 2014 through detailed regulations on its role and functions, organizational structure, and membership (Ministry of Education, 2014b). These examples indicate the CCP’s conception of the environment as constantly changing and thus the need to redefine priorities according to the changing environment.

One distinctive feature of this guerrilla policy style is the flexibility it allows for local or grassroots ideas and practices to spring up and be experimented with. As Heilmann and Perry (2011a) contended, once the strategic direction is established by the center, issues of tactics and operations are left to practitioners. This strategy also gives time for strategic policy-makers to deliberate over a potential policy and see how it would roll out in practice. Once local trials or experiments prove to be successful, they are likely to be promoted and institutionalized, whereas experiments that prove to be ineffective will be discarded. This probably explains why many of the ‘means to an end’ are not prescribed in government policies, such as in the case of academic councils. Educational policies are also characterized by ambiguous and often contradictory discourse, observed Wen (2013) when investigating how the idea of marketatization was handled in policies. She maintained that the intention and consequence was to leave room for creativity and innovation.

Flexible as it is, guerrilla policy style puts those who receive and must take steps to implement policy in an uncertain situation. They have to interpret the ambiguous policies and implement them through guessing and testing what is acceptable, where the limits are, and what is the bottom line of the government. Stern and O’Brien (2012) used the term “mixed signals” to
summarize the nature of government policies and “boundary pushing” (p. 177) to describe the challenging task that policy receivers are confronted with while trying to make sense of those blurry policies. In their opinion, the relationship between the state and the policy receivers (such as non-government organizations, journalists, and lawyers) is a two-way action of patrol, negotiation, and ultimately transformation of political boundaries. In this way, both parties are taking advantage of the policy flexibility and ambivalence to achieve their ends.

In addition to flexibility, another feature of adaptive governance is that it does not close doors to foreign ideas and practices. The economic reform initiated in the late 1970s would be a classic example. The government was willing to let the market determine supply and demand, which was previously deemed as an unacceptable, capitalist, exploitive economic model and was unheard-of in communist countries. In the field of education, Western conceptions of education were also considered and tried. Recent reforms in students’ admission processes, recruitment of university presidents, and residential colleges resemble foreign practices to varying degrees. These “borrowing” practices reflect the agility of adaptive governance.

While the flexibility afforded by the guerrilla policy style may be effective for venturing into the unknown world, it is nonetheless prone to cause serious problems. Heilmann and Perry (2011a) observed that political accountability is the price to pay for flexibility because political accountability depends on fixed institutional arrangements, formal rules, extensive legal provisions, and a clearly-defined division of labor, all of which are absent in the guerrilla policy style. As a result, flexibility tends to be abused by unscrupulous leaders, central and local, who take the opportunity to advance personal careers or individual interests, even if flexibility encourages renovation and innovation. In addition, the lack of political accountability gives rise to “un-clarified and under-institutionalized” (p. 14) relationships between the center and the local leadership. Therefore, local disparities are likely to occur. These side-effects of guerrilla policy-making are at play in various fields, including higher education.

The theory of adaptive governance advanced by Heilmann and Perry (2011a) takes an inductive approach to looking at the governance nature of the CCP and the Chinese government. It explains many of the myths revolving around China’s singularity among communist party-states; it also offers this study a critical lens—a political lens unique to China—through which to look at the borrowed practice of the board of trustees in Chinese public universities. Conceived as a top-
down lens, this political lens is crucial for understanding governance arrangements in Chinese universities, given the party’s control of higher education. Similar to the political frameworks for institutional governance that established the boundaries within which governance can be practiced, guerrilla-style adaptive governance determines how a borrowed idea, such as the board of trustees, can be introduced, developed, and practiced at both the macro and micro levels. Policy reviews in Chapter 2 have shown that none of the Chinese policy documents until recently had clearly articulated the role of the board, its composition, or the operational aspects of the board. This could be evidence of adaptive governance in that institutions can experiment with the idea as long as it is within the prescribed governance frameworks. In this way, local institutional knowledge and practices can be created and tested, and perhaps be evaluated and institutionalized in the future, just like the case of academic councils. Therefore, the theory of adaptive governance gives this study a powerful tool to explore the role of the board and its operations in public universities.

3.2 Social and educational environment for the board

From a global perspective, the introduction of university boards is closely related to social and educational developments. The advancing of civil society in the U.S. in the past and the emerging stakeholder society around the world at present provide a necessary condition for boards to exist and function. In China, arguably, the civil society and the stakeholder society seem to be at odds with one another. This section looks at the two “societies” in China and globally, outlining another lens for understanding the board in China.

3.2.1 (Absence of) The civil society

As a distinctive governance feature, adaptive governance speaks to the CCP’s governance style which sets the CCP and China apart from the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European socialist countries. There is, however, another governance feature of the CCP that is not very different from the governance system of the afore-mentioned former socialist countries. That is, the CCP and the government have traditionally incorporated the governance of various institutions into the government bureaucratic apparatus, leaving little room for them to be autonomously self-governed by individuals internal and particularly external to the institutions.
In other words, civil society is more or less absent in China. It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into the various definitions of civil society because it is still a contentious concept (Dillon, 2011; Pils, 2012) especially in the case of China (White, Howell, & Shang, 1996). In terms of the context in which the board of trustees is deeply rooted, a civil society is represented by an intermediate social space between the government and the individual, a space that is absent in China. As Verdery (1991) contended, the creation of civil society means:

…the populating of an intermediate social space between the level of households and that of the state itself with organizations and institutions not directly controlled from above, such as (in Western contexts) political parties, voluntary associations, independent trade unions, educational institutions more or less free of state control, and all manner of neighborhood, professional, charitable, special-purpose, and other groupings. (p. 432)

This social space was considered crucial for the American board of trustees to be institutionalized in the U.S. a long time ago. After visiting the U.S. in the early 1830s, the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville observed that, in sharp contrast to France where the creation of organizations was under state control, “Americans of all ages, all conditions and all dispositions constantly form organizations” (Tocqueville, trans. 1999, p. 88). He believed that those freely and voluntarily formed organizations, such as associations and trade unions, served to mediate between the state and the individual and thus played an indispensable role for a democratic society to progress. Not created for profit purposes, these organizations “serve some aspect of the common good … in the civic or ‘civil’ spirit to be found in democratic political systems” (Tocqueville, as cited in Pils, 2012, p. 2). In contrast to this liberal intermediate space between the state and the individual in the U.S. tradition, such a space was lacking in feudal China for two thousand years. The Chinese society was structured in two layers, composed of the ruling class and the masses respectively, without the formulation of influential interest groups—for example, aristocratic families, churches, or cities—that could mediate between the ruling and the ruled (Aglietta & Guo, 2013).

In socialist countries, China included, intermediate social space was not developed either. Rather than framing her theories from liberal Western values, Verdery (1991) proposed models from Eastern European social theories and based them on the realities of Eastern European socialism.
She argued that because the most important imperative of the socialist political apparatus is to enhance the bureaucracy’s capacity to control resource allocation, “power at the center will be enhanced to the extent that the resources of other actors are incapacitated” (p. 421). When any social actor is denied resource allocation power by the political apparatus, the former has to depend on the latter in order to be allocated resources and is rendered powerless. Thus, there is not much legitimacy for any other social actors to play a role between the state and the individual. Verdery (1991) observed,

> The near-emptiness of this space in most socialist societies was the direct consequence of the absorption of resources into the political apparatus and of the disablement of all organizations external to it. A party bureaucracy that coexisted with universities, trade unions, or other parties independent of it would have been a party bureaucracy that did not monopolize social allocation and that, according to the argument of this article, was antithetical to the operation of socialist systems. It was their nature to swell their own funds of resources and to incapacitate all others. In consequence, the social space of most socialist societies consisted of a mass of atomized households at the bottom and a massive bureaucratic and repressive apparatus at the top, with a near-vacuum in between. (pp. 432-433)

Even if there appears to exist an intermediate space, this space is nonetheless filled with “state-controlled”, “state-directed”, “state-created”, or “state-sponsored” organizations and events (Verdery, 1991, p. 433). France in the 19th century was not that different; it was no wonder that Tocqueville would be surprised at what he encountered in the United States.

One may contend that Verdery’s theory of the intermediate space, or civil society, is based on a planned socialist system; now that China has evolved dramatically towards a capitalist market system since she proposed the model two decades ago, the intermediate social space may have emerged. Admittedly, from the emergence of a first discourse on civil society in 1986 that provoked heated debate among Chinese scholars (S. Ma, 1994) to the various discussions on evidence of an arguably emerging civil society in China by both Chinese and Western scholars (M. Wang, 2011; White et al., 1996; K. Yu, 2009), there have been some developments leading to the potential creation of a “civil society”. However, state control of the intermediate space
does not seem to have been reduced significantly. For example, social organizations for a long time had been required to first obtain sponsorship from a government or party agency in a related policy area before they could apply for registration with the civil affairs department. This requirement has been removed for most social organizations in recent reform frameworks since the Third Plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee Congress in late 2013, but it is too early to tell how the state–society relationship will be reconfigured. Also, in China’s case, as Pils (2012) commented, “[C]ivil society’ is capable of an interpretation that makes it appear supportive of, rather than a challenge to, authoritarian state” and social organizations—trade unions, religious communities, government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs)—“can become instruments of control that are in turn controlled by the authoritarian State” (p. 3).

Apparently, China did not have the tradition of allowing an intermediate social space to develop in the past, as Aglietta and Guo (2013) have demonstrated, nor does it have such a space at present which could be considered equivalent to that of the American social structure that provides for civil engagement by independent groups.

In regard to the American concept of the lay board, the board is essentially a group of citizen volunteers who are entrusted to govern and serve the institution. One of the considerations for this arrangement was to prevent monopoly of power, be it from the state or any individual, in academic institutions (Zwingle, 1980). This independent governing authority conferred on the board is a manifestation of an intermediate space between the state and the individual, in which citizens can exercise self-governance based on their needs. The existence of an intermediate space is a prerequisite for the board’s governing authority. It signifies the state’s willingness to relinquish its control apparatus and allow citizen participation in governance in the broader sense. If the intermediate space does not exist, there is no legitimacy nor mechanism for the board to govern institutions in areas that could replace the state. Even an advisory board would need mechanisms provided by the intermediate space so that its voice can be heard and taken seriously.

In the educational realm, given the trend of decentralization (which was reviewed in Chapter 2), societal stakeholders have been encouraged to participate in and contribute to the developments of higher education, not only in terms of financing, but also collaboration and oversight in various forms. A stakeholder society is emerging in China. In this regard, the board of trustees that draws on societal actors may have some legitimacy in China. The following sections
elaborate on the concept of the stakeholder society and its conduciveness to the creation of boards of trustees in comparative terms.

### 3.2.2 Embrace of the stakeholder society

What has happened to Chinese public universities as a result of decentralization is similar to the fate of their counterparts in Continental Europe, where higher education has long been part of the state regulation system. Neave (2002) gave a historical review of the changing relationship between university and the society in Continental Europe. The stakeholder society, he observed, reflects “the dynamic relationships between different interests” (p. 25) in the society at large. Derived from the business interlocution, a stakeholder perspective implies that a business is being held accountable not only to those who are its “straightforward shareholders” but also to a wider range of constituencies, including their “values and beliefs” (p. 19). According to Neave, this is the firm’s “social responsibility” (p. 19). Extending the stakeholder concept to the development in higher education, Neave maintained that “[T]he rise of stakeholder society reflects, in effect, the rapid erosion of the unitary state as the prime force of co-ordination and authority in higher education” (p. 23). Until the 1960s, there had been three categories of interest groups, namely, the state, the estates of higher learning (the administration, the professoriate, and the students), and the external constituencies. Recent trends in Europe of drawing on expertise from external stakeholders to improve university governance (which was reviewed in Section 2.1 of Chapter 2) demonstrate the importance of a stakeholder society.

The role of external constituencies has varied with different academic traditions and different national contexts. While in Continental Europe the State was to provide a shield to HEIs so that they would not be infringed upon by external constituencies (such as in the Napoleonic and the Humboldtian model), the Anglo-Saxon model linked the university directly to the external constituencies. Within the Anglo-Saxon model, there were some differences between the British and American conceptions of the relationship between the individual institution and the external stakeholders. For the British, the primary stakeholders were internal to the university, although external stakeholders did matter; whereas, for the latter, shared governance was the norm and the primary power of governance went to “the local community and its representatives in the board of regents or trustees” (Neave, 2002, p. 28).
Neave’s idea of a stakeholder society highlights the necessity of involving all constituencies who have a vested interest in an education institution. This concept is particularly meaningful for the Chinese context. Compared with Western democracies which have developed the tradition of checks and balances of power in governance, China still tends to rely on centralized control despite the familiar rhetoric from the government which calls for structural and governance reforms. The traditional Confucian concepts on governance, which extol self-disciplined moral rule on the part of the elite, emphasize “the personal preference of higher mandarins” in bureaucracy rather than “an impersonal authority” (Chau, 1996, p. 53). Obviously, this mode of governance does not appreciate the participation of all stakeholders.

Nonetheless, certain changes have taken place in the higher education realm as well as in the society in recent years. Politically, democratic elections are being held at the village level in rural China, where villagers vote directly for their village cadres (Su & Yang, 2005). In institutions of higher learning, there have been a few cases where university presidents have been selected through open recruitment since 2012. With the increasing interaction between the university and society, universities are no longer insulated from society and have to respond to society’s demand for accountability. In addition to students’ and parents’ demand for quality education since they are paying tuition fees, funding sources such as the government and industry as well as donors want to make sure that their money is not misused. Universities are therefore held accountable to all these stakeholders. In this regard, there is a conducive environment in China for the board of trustees to operate and function.

The rise of a stakeholder society was in part also a result of massification in higher education (Neave, 2002). For one thing, massification brought more constituencies that would have a stake in HEIs; for another, it changed the purpose of higher education which, in turn, changed the paradigm and the dynamics between the institution, the society, and the government. Neave’s observation regarding the relationship between massification and the rise of the stakeholder society fits right into the Chinese context. Over the years until 1990, China’s higher education had retained its “elite” status with a very low participation rate of 3.4%. For most of the 1990s, enrollment increased steadily but slowly. In 1999, the government decided to rapidly expand enrollment; as a result, the enrollment for that year was a 47% increase over that of the previous year. The participation rate reached 30% in 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2013b). China is shifting from an elite higher education system to a mass higher education system. Consequently,
universities find themselves dealing with a much wider range of stakeholders. For example, now they need to strengthen their ties with the local governments for policy and financial support and with banks for financing their expanding infrastructure (Ngok, 2008); they contract out student services to business firms and compete with other institutions to find places for students’ intern training or graduate employment in enterprises (Xiwei Zhong & Yang, 2006). Chinese universities are more integrated with society as a result of massification.

In terms of the functions of external stakeholders, Amaral and Magalhães (2002) expanded Neave’s notion of the stakeholder society and categorize external stakeholders into two forms. External stakeholders of Form 1 are comparable to those in the business sector who are involved in the operation of a business. These stakeholders represent business interests and have the power to influence or even direct the universities’ education programs or research agendas by communicating to the universities about their labor or research needs. According to Amaral and Magalhães, “Form 1 corresponds to the growing presence of market rhetoric in the political discourse and to a vision of the university, and of higher education institutions in general, as service providers” (p. 12). Thus, it can be inferred that the main functions of Form 1 external stakeholders include a) informing universities of market demands so that universities can produce the “right” graduates, b) providing universities with funding to carry out certain research which is in line with the business or industry interests, and c) building on a larger network for universities to have more access to resources and to be more responsive to changing market situations. Therefore, the interaction between the university and society (i.e., external stakeholders) is fundamentally characterized by mutual economic benefits.

By contrast, for Form 2 external stakeholders, the relationship between the university and society is based on the notion of public good. The market is not considered a reliable force to direct HEIs; instead, the “broader and long-term interests of society” (Amaral & Magalhães, 2002, p. 12) should prevail. Here, Form 2 external stakeholders serve as gatekeepers to “ensure that externalities and the core values of the university are not jeopardized by institutional attitudes that emphasize short-term market values while ignoring the university’s social role” (p. 12) which is to serve the public good. The role of external stakeholders of Form 2 would include a) receiving information from the university regarding its financial and managerial operations, b) providing informed advice to the university, c) advocating to the university the interests of the
society at large or of the local community, d) admonishing the university against foul play, and e) acting as liaison between the society/community and the university.

Amaral and Magalhães’s categorization of external stakeholders is operative in the sense that both Form 1 and Form 2 represent the interaction between the university and the society, the difference being that the former is constructed towards collaboration (although it is market-driven and thus may subject universities to market erosion) and the latter embodies the supervision function of such interaction to advocate for the public good. A university may have many interfaces in terms of interaction with society, at different levels and with different objectives. The board of trustees, however, would be at the top of the hierarchy of these interfaces because it is usually either the top governing body of a university, or an advisory body to the senior administration that provides advice on major questions of development for the institution as well as oversight of a wide range of activities.

As far as the stakeholder society is concerned, developments in Chinese higher education seem to provide the necessary conditions for the board of trustees, including its external stakeholders of both Form 1 and Form 2, to operate and function. However, on the other hand, China does not have an intermediate social space which is another prerequisite for the board of trustees to exist, especially in relation to its governing authority. The absence of such a space, instead of nurturing a culture of participation, would be a hindrance for citizen participation. With these two conditions working at the same time, where would the Chinese board be situated? How could the board negotiate a space for itself and play a legitimate role between the university and the various stakeholders that the board represents? Can the stakeholder society alone enable the Chinese board to play a role, and an effective role, in institutional governance? What is then the relationship between the university, the board of trustees, and the government? Since the CCP adheres to an adaptive governance style, will this unique style have an impact on the role of the board and, if so, how? These political, social, and educational constructs—adaptive governance, civil society, and the stakeholder society—build the conceptual foundation for this study on the role of the Chinese board.
3.3 Conceptual framework

3.3.1 An ideal type for the board of trustees

The board of trustees in Chinese public universities, as reviewed in Chapter 2, is clearly a product of Western influence, and American influence to be precise. Even though higher education systems in China and the U.S. are vastly different, a study of public boards in Chinese universities would be incomplete without keeping the influence of the American model in mind. In addition to being a borrowed concept, the Chinese board is a relatively new, rarely studied initiative at present. Therefore, this study draws on elements of the American board of trustees to construct an ideal type, laying a foundation for its design in terms of conceptual framework, research methods, and analysis. The use of an ideal type acknowledges the American influence in history but at the same time focuses on the current Chinese context. Weber (1949) maintained,

…..The ideal typical concept will help to develop our skill in imputation in research: it is no “hypothesis” but it offers guidance to the construction of hypotheses. It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description. (p. 90)

An ideal type is necessary for this study given the particular history of the Chinese board. Admittedly, due to variations in university status (e.g., public or private) and idiosyncratic requirements of state regulations in the U.S., there is no fixed definition for what a governing board is, its role, or its composition; nonetheless, there is some basic, generic understanding about those concepts as well as the legal foundations for them (Corbally Jr., 1970), which can be treated as the ideal type. As Weber (1949) contended,

…..An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct (Gedankenbild). In its conceptual purity, this mental construct (Gedankenbild) cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. (p. 90)
According to Weber (1949), the ideal type is like a generic concept or a utopia. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a generic understanding of the American board is used to construct the ideal type, as explained below.

Section 3.2.1 of this chapter showed that there is an intermediate social space in civil society that provides citizens with the opportunity to govern public affairs independent of the state. This liberal space is the necessary condition for an independent board of trustees, which is largely drawn from outside the institution, to operate and function. This space nurtures a culture of participation and a mechanism for participation in the governance of public institutions. The American board is such an example. It is considered autonomous and serves as a buffer to state intervention. The American board also connects with the community, which, from an educational perspective, fits with the stakeholder society that was explained in Section 3.2. An ideal type for the board of trustees is thus constructed (see Figure 3.1).

**Figure 3.1** An Ideal Type for the Board of Trustees

In its political and social dimensions, the board is, on the one hand, an independent force in relation to the state; on the other hand, it embodies a liberal social space which is provided in a civil society which, in turn, is allowed by the state. In the educational dimension, the board
connects with the community, under the context of a stakeholder society. This ideal type captures the essence of the board, that is, the conditions for its existence and the role it serves.

In order to have a better understanding of this ideal type, it is also necessary to give details on the role of the board, not as part of the ideal type but as a point of reference. The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB, 2010c) published a template (rather than a prescription) of eight principles for the role and responsibilities of boards. The overarching principles include: (a) the board is responsible for the mission, heritage, transcendent values, and strategic direction of the institution; (b) the board is expected to respect the culture of shared governance in the academy; (c) the board is the ultimate authority to approve the budget; (d) the board maintains open communication with stakeholders on campus and establishes rules for their voices to be heard; (e) the board is expected to uphold accountability and transparency; (f) the board is responsible for appointing and assessing the performance of the president; (g) the board is responsible for connecting its institution with the communities it serves; and (h) the system governing board is expected to clearly delineate authority and responsibility among different bodies of a governing, administrative, and advisory nature. The AGB template points out that the public board is usually appointed by the governor and its authority to determine the mission of the institution is usually framed within the constraint of state policies and state needs. Again, the underlying assumption is that the board of trustees, public and private, is independent and serves as a buffer in achieving institutional autonomy as well as a medium to connect with the community.

In addition to the governing board, another body is also relevant to understanding the interface between external stakeholders and institutions. This is the sounding board, which is usually an advisory body to the president, although it may assume a quasi-governing role in some cases (Worth, 2008). Worth did a ground-breaking study (and perhaps the only comprehensive study to date) on American sounding boards that did not have legal governing responsibilities for institutions. The members of these boards were mostly from outside of the institution, for example, donors, corporate executives, and government officials (mainly for public institutions), and they could come from all over the world. The role of these boards varied widely across institutions, ranging from a pure advisory function to a quasi-governing body. Their activities also varied. For example, some could have mainly a fundraising responsibility; some advised presidents on curriculum and academic issues; some provided students with career counselling
and jobs and internships; and some did a mix of many things. Nonetheless, they were generally regarded as the institutions’ ambassadors and advocates who could advise the president and bring in financial and nonfinancial resources to institutions, according to Worth’s study. Both the sounding board to the president and the governing board draw on external expertise to serve the mission of the university.

Now that an ideal type for the board has been constructed, how can it illuminate the study of Chinese boards in particular? This ideal type is based on the American model, and it is used for analytical purpose, not for comparison per se. The next section explains the use of this ideal type in the Chinese context.

3.3.2 The Chinese board

Before the reform era, like many former socialist countries in Eastern Europe, China did not have an intermediate social space between the party-state and individuals. Institutions were incorporated into the state apparatus, receiving orders and carrying out implementation. There was not a typical stakeholder society, either. Therefore, the party-state became almost the sole external stakeholder.

However, unlike their Eastern European counterparts, the Chinese communist leaders had been adopting a guerrilla style of governance and had successfully weathered challenging circumstances. Instead of closing doors to the West, they were learning from the West. Under adaptive governance, as was shown in Section 3.1, the party-state seems to have allowed some elements of a civil society to gradually emerge; the stakeholder society is apparently being embraced and accommodated, to varying degrees. Therefore, there are several possible roles for the Chinese board, depending on the extent to which the state will allow the board to operate and play a role in the political system, that is, the political realm (see Figure 3.2). It could be positioned in the educational realm only, simply as a stakeholder without much involvement in polity, if there is no intermediate space allowed for it. It could also be moved to the political and social realms, if the party-state allows more room for intermediate social space. In the latter case, the status of the board can be further envisioned in two possible forms. In the first case, the board could be considered an affiliated sub-unit of the institution, more internally oriented towards the institution (which is represented by the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of
the party committee). In the second case, when more intermediate space is allowed, the board could be more oriented towards being independent of both the institutional administration and the party-state.

**Figure 3.2** The Chinese Board Under Adaptive Governance

**ADAPTIVE GOVERNANCE**

*Figure 3.2. The solid lines connecting two entities suggest a currently existing relationship between the two. Broken lines indicate possible interactive relationships between two entities, depending on how much intermediate space is allowed.*

In terms of the relationship between the board and various stakeholders, the underlying assumption is that the board may or may not be a body that represents all constituencies of the institution’s stakeholders. There may be some overlap between stakeholders who have representatives on the board and those who do not. Therefore, in this sense, the board could be operating in parallel with some stakeholders while itself constituting a stakeholder group represented by some, if not all, of the institution’s stakeholders.

In contrast to Figure 3.1 which is an ideal type for the board of trustees, Figure 3.2 is a variant of that ideal type for the Chinese context. This is to say, the role of the board is primarily conditioned by how much latitude or space the party-state gives to the civil society. There may be many factors that possibly affect the position of the board. Figure 3.2 does not assume that all
other factors are excluded, but it does single out the relationship between the party-state and the civil society as the fundamental factor. If an intermediate space was encouraged, participation from external stakeholders, especially with regard to consultation and oversight, could be promoted. If more space was allowed, the board could even be oriented towards a governing role. Given that Chinese public institutions are incorporated into the government apparatus, the stakeholder society itself is not a sufficient condition for participation from external members. The board is, therefore, at the interface between the party state, the civil society, and the stakeholder society, all under the framework of adaptive governance. Its role will reflect the conflicts, negotiations, concessions, and aggressions among these political, social, and educational spheres. No matter what role the Chinese board may play in institutional governance arrangements, for example, a governing body similar to the governing board in Figure 3.1 or an advisory body like a sounding board, the adapted model in Figure 3.2 is an interactive and dynamic ideal type, setting up a prototype and at the same time allowing for flexibility.

3.4 Summary

This study takes two factors into consideration in the development of a conceptual framework. First, in China, the board of trustees is a borrowed concept from the West, which has fundamental differences from China in term of governance models, both for society and for higher educational institutions. Therefore, the framework should be suitable for the Chinese context while acknowledging the board’s historical heritage. Second, the Chinese party-state is changing and adapting to new conditions. An ideal-type approach reflects these two realities about China and the Chinese board. It is constructed on the basis of necessary conditions for a board to exist and operate in an educational setting. When applied to the Chinese context, the governance style of the party-state becomes the ubiquitous force for policy-making and policy implementation. How much intermediate social space the adaptive party-state allows for a society becomes the key factor in determining the legitimacy and role of the Chinese board. At the interface between the state, the civil society, and the stakeholder society, the boards of Chinese public universities may assume different roles, depending on in which direction they are being pushed and pulled by these forces. This kind of fluidity is essential in interpreting boards and their relationships with institutions in the Chinese context.
As was mentioned in Section 1.3 of Chapter 1, the research questions of this study were conceived out of curiosity about the co-existence of two seemingly contradictory frameworks for governance: the board (a Western liberal governance mechanism) and the Chinese presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee. The ideal type conceptual framework provides a lens to look at and analyze the complexity around the Chinese board. The next chapter elaborates upon the research design and methods used for investigating the complex reality of Chinese boards.
Chapter 4
Research Design and Methods

As an imported governance practice (or perhaps an “imported concept” would be more appropriate here) from the West, the Chinese board is embedded in the complex relationship between the state, society, and institution, which is illustrated by the ideal-typical model described in Section 3.3.2. As was reviewed in Chapter 2, it is evident that the board of trustees in Chinese public universities has undertaken different roles and functions over the last hundred years, mostly as a result of the changing political, social and educational context of the time. This study therefore asked a general question: what is the role of the public board of trustees in Chinese universities now? The study investigated the topic by analyzing qualitative data obtained from publicly available sources such as institutional websites, responses to a questionnaire distributed to board secretariats, and interviews with board secretariat staff. Originally, the study was designed to interview board members so that their perceptions about the role of the board could be captured. Due to the challenges of accessing board members in the Chinese context, a problem that became identified as the research project progressed, the study was redesigned to focus on the staff at board secretariats who are dealing with board matters on a day-to-day basis.

This chapter begins with the methodological framework for the study. Then it reviews the data collection methods which involved three phases. A detailed account of data analysis methods is then provided, followed by a discussion of the limitations and significance of the research design.

4.1 Methodological Framework

Given the governance realities of contemporary China, that is, guerrilla-style adaptive governance and the absence of a well-developed civil society by Western standards coupled with the educational realities of a stakeholder society, this study assumed that the role of the board would reflect and impact those realities through various channels. Thus, the following sub-questions were developed:

- Which universities have created a board and in what contexts?
- How does the board contribute to the work of the university?
- What benefits do board members obtain from their participation?
- What are the challenges associated with operating a board?
- What is the relationship between the board and the university, as well as its stakeholders such as the state and society?

These questions aim to understand the existing and potential roles of the public board, in terms of the rationale for which a university created its board, the ways in which the board impacts the university and vice versa, and the relationship between the board and other actors (i.e., stakeholders on and not on the board, the university, the civil society, and the state).

Due to the exploratory nature of these questions, the study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate the research questions for a number of reasons. First, a qualitative study suits the nature of the research questions, which ask what and how, rather than why, in terms of the relations among the variables (Creswell, 2007). Second, due to the lack of empirical data on the current situation of boards in public universities in China, this study was exploratory in nature. In this sense, it fit well with Creswell’s rationale for choosing a qualitative approach. Marshall and Rossman (2006) also recognized the value of qualitative research if the study is examining a “little-known phenomenon” or “informal and unstructured linkages and processes in organizations” (p. 53). Public universities in China are still exploring ways to incorporate boards of trustees into their formal institutional structure, and formal organizational norms are not yet fully established. Therefore, a qualitative, exploratory study is appropriate. Third, the researcher positioned herself in the research process as a learner who would be exploring the role of the board “from the participants’ view rather than as an ‘expert’ who passes judgment on participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 18).

Epistemologically speaking, a constructivist paradigm frames this study. This paradigm “disallow[s] the existence of an external objective reality independent of an individual from which knowledge may be collected or gained” so that “each individual constructs knowledge and his or her experience through social interaction” (Costantino, 2008, p. 117). Although there may be board charters or government policies that assign a particular role to the boards, this study assumed that individuals who are involved in board matters, such as staff in board secretariats and board members, would offer their own personal views about the role of the board. Therefore, given its interpretative nature, the study attempted to understand how the role of board is perceived and carried out, from the insiders’ experiential view rather than from the outsiders’ prescription or projection. Most importantly, as the conceptual framework of this study has
suggested, the guerrilla policy style of adaptive governance in China allows for flexibility and local or grassroots improvisation, which suggested that formal institutions alone could not be a sufficient source for investigation.

This research is a basic, interpretive study, which is "not a phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative analysis, or critical or ethnographic study" (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). According to Merriam, interviews, observations and document analysis are the main data collection methods for basic qualitative studies; data analysis and findings will be focused on identifying and reporting recurring patterns or cross-cutting themes. The following section discusses data collection methods and sampling in detail.

4.2 Data collection methods

Both formal (and official) and informal channels regarding the role of the board needed to be examined because, as Heilmann and Perry (2011a) have demonstrated, the Chinese government has been trying to standardize governance through formal institutions but at the same time the guerrilla working style still persists. The board charter of individual institutions, which is supposed to be a binding, regulatory document concerning the board, would be the most direct formal institutional document touching upon the role of the board. For example, how the charter defines the board and articulates its structure and operation may well reflect the governance concept and practice of the institution and the government. In addition, the composition of the board, no matter whether it is specified in the charter or not, is an important indicator that can tell much about the relational dynamics among different stakeholders, especially for different types of institutions, that is, MOE-affiliated, line ministry-affiliated, or provincial universities. Similarly, how the charter sets criteria for board member selection can reveal to what extent the board is drawing on social connections as well as who has authority on or over the board. In view of this necessity for understanding formal institutions, the study was designed to conduct content analysis on primary source materials related to university boards of trustees. The primary text source was board charter documents, complemented by laws and regulations, news releases, and university reports. This analysis offered insight pertaining to the general role of boards and served as a basis for the design of later research instruments.
The removal and re-introduction of boards of trustees for public institutions took place while China was experimenting with possibilities in changing political, social and educational environments. In this respect, the distribution of boards in public universities became a point of interest for this study because it assumed that different environments would react to the concept of boards differently. As a matter of fact, not every public institution has created a board. It was thus imperative for this study to find out how many institutions have a board and how these boards are operated in reality. This information is missing from public sources (e.g., institutional websites) and academic literature. To the best knowledge of the researcher, no other study had involved a comprehensive survey of the boards of trustees in public universities when this study was designed. Data about the distribution of boards may have implications for the influence of the board nationwide as an interface between the institution, the state, and the society. They would also inform the researcher about sample selection for the study. Therefore, a questionnaire was sent to the board secretariats of universities reportedly having a board, either to the secretariat contact person listed on the website or another individual referred to the researcher by other offices of the university. The questionnaire asked for general information on that institution’s board, such as the creation date of the board, its demographic composition, board member selection criteria, and so forth. This questionnaire collected the necessary background data needed for a basic understanding of the boards.

In addition to making an effort to understand the formal institutions, the study also relied heavily on informal channels through which the role of the board could be gleaned. Because of their direct involvement in board matters, staff at the board secretariats were believed to have primary knowledge about their boards. Through qualitative data collection methods such as interviews with board secretariat staff who responded to the questionnaire, the study sought to identify both the obvious factors and the nuances in the relationships among players that might not be seen through formal institutions only. Interview questions were designed to understand the role of the board based on the personal perceptions and experiences of board secretariat staff. Since governance and especially civil society issues are still sensitive topics in China, the interview questions avoided asking participants directly about relationships between the board, the state, and the civil society; rather, they were focused on the operation of the board and the relationship between the board and the institution, as well as challenges associated with its operation. In this way, the questions would seem less intimidating to participants. Inquiry into the dynamic
relationships among different stakeholders that were outlined by the ideal type of Chapter 3 (Figure 3.2) was thus embedded in the questions.

The term “board secretariat” warrants some explanation because it may cause confusion with the formal organizational structure in a Canadian or American university. In the Chinese context, universities having a board usually set up a board secretariat, but with few exceptions the secretariat is typically affiliated with an office, for example, the President’s Office, the University Advancement Office or the External Liaison Office, which often has other mandates in addition to board matters. There is a Secretary but he or she is very often a senior university administrator cross-appointed as the Secretary on a part-time basis. Therefore, board-related matters are actually dealt with by the designated office and the head of the office is in charge of board matters such as contacting and receiving board members, organizing board meetings, and coordinating internal and external resources. The head of the office usually has one or two staff members dealing with board matters as they arise and reporting to him or her. In some cases, these staff members are full-time and in many cases they are also cross-appointed to other responsibilities of the office. Hence, in the interview stage, the participants were either the heads or associate heads of the designated offices or staff members in an office closely related to board matters. The rule of thumb was that interview participants were administrative staff members with responsibility for facilitating the work of the boards even though they may not have had the title of board secretary. For the convenience of this study, these interview participants are referred to as staff at the board secretariat unless otherwise specified. The status of participants is further explained later in Section 4.2.3 of this chapter.

Given that the *National Guidelines 2010-2020* referred to seeking proper ways for universities to establish a board of trustees, the design of this research also included consulting academics who were involved in the process of drafting the *National Guidelines*. The purpose of this was to gain insight into the rationale for and implications of such a policy. These consultations with academics expanded the researcher’s knowledge about board-related policies and helped to situate this research in the contemporary context of Chinese higher education development. Names of academics who were on the National Guidelines drafting committees were available from public sources, such as government agency websites and news releases.
The following sections in this chapter provide a detailed account of how the project evolved from its initial research design to the completion of data analysis.

### 4.2.1 Phase 1: Mapping out the distribution of boards in public universities

The objective of this component of the data collection was to find out which universities had created a board, that is, to get reliable statistics about the current board development in public, baccalaureate degree-granting, regular HEIs that were accredited by the Chinese Ministry of Education by August 30, 2010. First, a complete list of such institutions was compiled based on two lists available from the Ministry of Education website (Ministry of Education, 2010d): (a) the list of baccalaureate degree-granting, regular HEIs including private and public institutions; and (b) the list of private, regular HEIs. After the private institutions and the public institutions that offered three-year and two-year certificate programs were removed from the first list, it was found that a total of 741 public institutions met the criteria to be included in this study. In the second step, the website of each of the 741 universities was consulted to find out whether the university had a board and if so, relevant information about the board (e.g., its history, board charter, board member list, and board member titles) was collected. Contact information for the President’s Office, board secretariat or affiliated office was also documented. In the last step, phone calls were made to each of the 741 universities to verify whether they had a board. The President’s Office of each institution was chosen as the first point of contact because, judging from the current literature on boards and their working relationship with institutions, the President’s Office is most likely to know whether the university has set up a board. Another reason for contacting the President’s Office first was because it is usually this office that is responsible for handling information disclosure requests from the public as is required by the Methods of Disclosing Information About Higher Education Institutions, which was issued by the Ministry of Education and came into effect on September 1, 2010. According to this policy, institutions are obligated to make known to the public their internal governance and organizational structures. If a university reported that it has a board, contact information for its board secretariat or the office which was responsible for board affairs was collected. The researcher also kept a journal documenting the experiences and reflections that she had while making those inquiries. This inquiry phase lasted two months, from early March of 2011 to the
beginning of May 2011. During this initial inquiry phase, 99 universities were found to have created a board.

In this way, statistics on the distribution of boards were obtained, for example, which universities had boards and in which province they were located, and what types of universities they were (MOE-affiliated, other ministry- or national bureau-affiliated, or provincial education commission-affiliated). In cases where institutional websites posted information about their boards, content analysis was carried out to study the board charters, self-reports, news releases, and so forth, to arrive at a tentative assessment of the boards regarding their type as classified by Fan (2010) (e.g., collaborative, supervisory, or decision-making), their rights and obligations, board member selection criteria and processes, and board activities (e.g., meetings and board-related news). Based on this preliminary analysis, a questionnaire for board secretariats (see Appendix C) was designed. Semi-structured interview protocols for staff at the board secretariat (see Appendices D, E, and F) and for board members were also designed, which were components of the ethical protocol for this project. The ethical protocol also made reference to consultation with academics who were involved in board policy-making, including how to approach them and what information the researcher would be interested in obtaining from them. In August 2011, the project obtained approval from the Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto.

4.2.2 Phase 2: Recruiting board secretariats to participate in the questionnaire

The first phase of this project identified 99 public universities that reported to have established a board. In November 2011, the researcher called the offices which were reportedly responsible for dealing with board matters at these 99 institutions. It turned out that 15 of these institutions confirmed that they either did not yet have a board or their board had been dissolved some time ago. Therefore, by November 2011, the total number of public universities that this study identified as having a board was 84. When recruiting these secretariats to participate in the questionnaire, the researcher was unable to reach anyone from the secretariat office at two institutions and another two institutions refused to participate. The questionnaire, together with the invitation letter, was then sent to the remaining 80 institutions in accordance with their preferred mode of communication, by email, regular mail, or facsimile. A request for a copy of
their board charters and membership lists with members’ titles was also made. By the end of March 2012, 40 universities responded to the questionnaire (including one that responded through telephone). The response rate was 50%. Among those who did not participate, 13 institutions did not respond and 27 institutions explicitly declined the invitation. Although an explanation was not requested, most secretariats nonetheless provided some reason for their refusal to participate, for example, not having the time to complete the questionnaire or not being allowed to disclose board information. Further information on why some secretariats did not participate can be found in the next chapter which reports on questionnaire data.

While this phase was mainly about recruiting institutions to complete the questionnaire, it offered an opportunity for individuals working at these institutions to get to know the researcher and the project, which in turn helped the researcher to improve her research design. Reactions to the questionnaire invitation were carefully documented in the researcher’s journal. Although reactions to the invitation were mixed, 15 institutions were willing to share with the researcher their thoughts on the project as well as the operational aspects of their boards. The board secretariat of three institutions even invited the researcher to go to their offices and had an informal talk with the researcher. Through communication with institutions and their board secretariats, the researcher was able to size up the problems she might encounter if she wanted to recruit board members for interviews. Her original plan was to select four institutions which responded to the questionnaire (i.e., one MOE-affiliated institution, one institution affiliated with a ministry other than the MOE, and two provincial institutions) as case studies and interview their board members. The discussions with board officials led her to conclude that it would be extremely difficult to recruit board members for interviews for a number of reasons. Firstly, board members are mostly high-profile government officials and business leaders. It would be difficult for the researcher to reach them because institutions were generally reluctant to disclose their board members’ contact information, not to mention that very often the institutions themselves were frustrated by the lack of accessibility of their members when needed. Secondly, given the strong administrative and bureaucratic structure of China’s higher education system, institutions were not likely to open up to a researcher who was doing an independent doctoral project affiliated with a foreign university. One director from a board secretariat asserted that no institution would let the researcher interview their board members if the research was not conducted in the name of the Ministry of Education and if the researcher was unable to present
an MOE red letterhead document (hongtou wenjian, in Chinese) requiring institutions to participate in the study because, in his opinion, administrative orders from above represented the legitimacy of a research project. Also, according to him, participation would be a matter of privacy and it would be extra work for board secretariats. Similar remarks were also passed on to the researcher from a number of other institutions. Last but not the least, board members could still decline the invitation to participate even if their institution expressed an interest in participating, and the university personnel contacted during this phase of the study suggested that this would be a serious concern.

Taking into consideration the practical and cultural difficulties that would be associated with recruiting board members for the study, the researcher revised the research design. Communication with the secretariats of many institutions demonstrated that administrators directly involved in board matters (either staff at the board secretariat or the head or associate head of its affiliated office) were apparently the most knowledgeable source for learning about the role of their boards because they were the ones dealing with board matters on a daily basis and thus could offer primary data on how the role of the board played out and how the board functioned. Because they were based in an office of the university, they seemed to be more accessible. Moreover, they had come to know the researcher through telephone conversations and email correspondence with her. If they had chosen to respond to the questionnaire, they might be willing to talk about their boards in in-depth interviews with the researcher. Therefore, instead of interviewing board members, the researcher decided to interview the head or associate head of the designated office for board affairs or a staff member at the board secretariat, which was usually a very small unit consisting of a few people and sometimes just one person. The new design shifted away from the notion of detailed case studies at a small number of institutions, to receiving greater detail on the board activities at a much larger number of institutions. The research questions were therefore not investigated from the perspectives of board members, but from the administrators’ points of view. The researcher submitted a revised ethical protocol to the Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto and she obtained approval in June 2012.
4.2.3 Phase 3: Interviewing staff at the board secretariats

In early September of 2012, as promised in the questionnaire invitation, the researcher emailed the study report based on the questionnaire data to all 40 participating board secretariats. In her email, she also sent an interview invitation and the informed consent letter to invite staff at the board secretariat (including head and associate head of its designated office) to participate in face-to-face interviews which could be scheduled between late September and late December 2012.

Response to the invitation was very positive. All secretariats except three (two of which did not respond and the third which declined the invitation) were willing to participate in the interviews. There were participants from 37 universities in 14 provinces and municipalities (see Figure 4.1), including 21 heads or associate heads of designated offices and 16 staff members at the board secretariats.

**Figure 4.1** Thirty-Seven Participating Institutions from 14 Administrative Regions in Phase 3
The participating institutions included 13 MOE-affiliated universities, 22 provincial universities, and two provincial universities that were affiliated with central government units (see Table 4.1). From late September to mid-November 2012, the researcher travelled to 20 cities in 11 provinces and municipalities across China to conduct face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with participants from 33 universities. In addition, four interviews were conducted by telephone in early December 2012 because these interviewees were not available to meet with the researcher during her scheduled travel time. Most interviews lasted at least an hour, depending on the number of questions the interviewees had for the researcher. All interviewees had read the consent form and agreed to participate. Interviews were not audio-taped; instead, note-taking was used with permission from interviewees. Notes for each interview were typed into a separate Word document in a question-and-answer format. Reflections or analytical insights of the researcher on each interview were documented at the first opportunity.

Table 4.1 Number and Types of Participating Institutions and Individuals for Interviews in Phase 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provinces/municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOE-affiliated institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions affiliated with a central government unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During her travels, the researcher had the opportunity to have informal conversations with two academics who were on the National Guidelines drafting committees. The objective of these conversations was to try to understand the rationale for referring to the board of trustees in the document. Insights from these conversations are presented and discussed in Chapter 6.
4.3 Data Analysis Methods

As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, there are three main data categories for this study: (a) documents publicly available from institutional websites, including but not limited to the history of boards, board charters, board member lists, news releases on board events, board archives, etc.; (b) responses to the questionnaire and additional board charters and board member lists provided by participating institutions (supplementing the documentation available online); and (c) notes from interviews with board secretariat staff.

Data in the first category served to provide a general understanding of the board of trustees in public universities in China. They included the year when the boards were created, their evolution over time, the composition of the boards, and the expected role of the boards. Content analysis was used in analyzing these data. According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis is “an empirically grounded method, explorative in process, and predictive or inferential in intent” (p. xvii). This characteristic of content analysis fits well with this study which was exploratory in nature and which did not have much empirical literature to draw upon. The content analysis for this study was “problem-driven” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 342), that is, it aimed to get answers to something which was not accessible by means of studying texts alone. Data from this category revealed trends in the creation of boards by different types of institutions and in different regions that had different levels of economic, social, and educational development. Findings based on the content analysis provided a general picture of the distribution and role of public boards in China.

As a basis for the questionnaire and interview instruments, they were the reference point against which findings from the questionnaire and interviews were compared.

Since not every institution provided information about their boards online, the questionnaire was designed to ask basic questions about these boards, such as when their boards were created, current board composition, how frequently a board meeting was convened, which office and how many personnel were responsible for board matters, what was the expected role of the boards, and how the board members were selected. Institutions were encouraged to provide their board charters and member lists as well. Responses to the questionnaire were typed into one Excel spreadsheet and organized question by question. Chapter 5 presents the findings of this component of the study. Though largely descriptive, this chapter also analyzes data by drawing on relevant policies and regulations where applicable. With regards to board charters collected
from respondents, a few broad themes were identified by using the open coding method (Patton, 2002) to sum up commonalities and make comparisons among charters. Here, the role of the board was critically examined from the perspective of formal institutions, that is, how the formalized regulations and documents reflected the role and operation of the board, whether adaptive governance was at play and if so, in what ways, and the relationship between the board and the institution as well as its other stakeholders such as the state (or government) and the society.

The third category of data was obtained from semi-structured interviews. The interviews were designed to obtain an in-depth understanding about the role of boards, their functions and operations, issues and challenges as perceived by those who deal with board matters on a daily basis. Data analysis primarily followed the process proposed by Patton (2002): open coding at the initial thorough reading of data, systematic formal coding in subsequent readings, and finding patterns and themes. Analysis was assisted by the use of NVivo 10 (which is a widely used qualitative data analysis software developed by QSR International). Therefore, from non-institutional data, the study had a close look at the relationships among different stakeholders. Through these relationships, the study was able to assess the role, impact, and status of existing public boards, which are conditioned by the adaptive governance, the civil society (if any), and the stakeholder society. Chapter 6 presents and analyzes the findings of this phase of the study.

In reporting findings from the questionnaire and interview responses, the confidentiality of respondents (institutions and individual interviewees) was strictly observed. Given the small number of universities that have a board within a single province, little identifying information was offered so as to protect the institutions and the interviewees. In order to give the reader a fuller understanding of the findings, under certain circumstances some identifying information was included in terms of the type of university, its specialty, history and size, or the province or city where it is located, but caution was taken so that the institutions and interviewees were not identifiable. If a piece of information was publicly available such as from institutional websites or news reports, the name of the university could be disclosed. In this case, the study does not discriminate between participating and non-participating institutions in order to protect the confidentiality of those who participated in the study. In addition, because interviews were not audio-taped, interview responses were documented in the form of notes. Therefore, in presenting the data, the study rarely used long, direct quotes; instead, most often, the original Chinese words
or phrases that interviewees used were given and their English translation was provided in parentheses or vice versa.

### 4.4 Limitations and significance of the research design

This study would have been improved if the following limitations could have been minimized. First, while every attempt was made to identify every university with an existing board, it is possible that not all relevant universities were identified. During the first phase of this study when the researcher initiated calls to institutions’ President’s Offices to confirm whether they had created a board, some offices may have given an untrue answer. For example, they may have deliberately answered “No” if they did not want to be approached by the researcher, even if they did have a board. Quite a number of institutions were unable to give a definite answer although they promised the researcher to pursue that question with other units of the university. In such circumstances, these institutions were categorized in this study as not having a board. Therefore, the number of institutions that currently have a board may be underestimated. Secondly, because questionnaire and interview respondents were allowed to skip any question that they did not feel comfortable answering, there were missing data in the dataset. Thirdly, a small percentage of respondents advised the researcher that the member lists they provided might not be up-to-date because their boards had not convened for a few years and membership renewal had not begun yet.

Despite these limitations, the research design provides information that has never been collected before. The questionnaire had a fairly high response rate of 50%. Board secretariat staff from 93% of the institutions that were invited eventually interviewed. The researcher was able to obtain detailed data from the individuals that probably knew the absolute most about the day-to-day operations of these boards. All the information obtained was crucial for understanding the current role of the board of trustees in Chinese public universities.

The following two chapters report research findings and analyze the data, first the questionnaire data and then the interview data.
Chapter 5
Questionnaire Findings and Analysis

Given that there were no reliable statistics on which universities had created a board and that there was no official list of universities with boards, the first objective of this study was to map out the distribution of boards in Chinese public universities. Achievement of this goal also helped the researcher identify potential participating institutions for the second phase of the study. The objective of conducting a questionnaire survey among those having a board was to obtain a general understanding of each board’s membership, member selection criteria and process, and the operational aspects of the board such as its administration, structure, and meeting arrangements. Originally, the questionnaire instrument was also meant to offer clues as to which universities could be included in the subsequent case study, but it turned out to be an opportunity for the researcher to establish rapport with questionnaire-participating institutions. This relationship facilitated the third phase of the study, involving interviews with board secretariat staff from these institutions. The questionnaire was sent to 80 board secretariats in late November of 2011. Forty secretariats responded to the questionnaire. Among them, 35 institutions sent their board charters to the researcher, and 26 institutions provided their board member list directly or by providing a World Wide Web link to their board membership.

This chapter presents and analyzes findings from the first and second phases of the study. Data are mainly organized in the order of the questions in the questionnaire.

5.1 Findings from Phase 1

The first phase of this study was designed to find out which public universities had created a board. Through consulting institutional websites and making phone calls to each of the public regular HEIs, the study was able to map out the distribution of boards as of November 2011.

5.1.1 Distribution of boards

The first phase of this study revealed that 84 public universities had established a board (see Table 5.1). Eleven percent of public institutions had a board and over half of these institutions (57%) were under the direct supervision of provincial governments. However, only 8% of
provincial universities had a board, making it the least likely institutional type to create a board, compared with 40% for MOE-affiliated institutions and 20% for institutions affiliated with other line ministries or central government units. MOE-affiliated institutions took up only 10% of the total number of regular HEIs but accounted for 35% of the total number of boards. Apparently, MOE-affiliated universities, which are usually considered higher up the hierarchy of Chinese higher educational institutions, had achieved the greatest developments in creating a board.

Table 5.1 Distribution of Boards by Institutional Type as of November 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>All institutions</th>
<th>Institutions with a board</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MOE-affiliated</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliated with other ministries or central</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government units</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>741 (100%)</td>
<td>84 (11%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of regional distribution, the 84 universities were located in 23 out of 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions in mainland China. If these administrative regions are grouped into the four economic regions that the National Bureau of Statistics had identified as of 2011, the distribution of boards shows a correlation with the economic status of the regions where boards were found (see Figure 5.1).

The Eastern region had 54 universities that had created a board, or 64% of the total number of boards in China, although public institutions in the region accounted for only 42% of the national total. Seventeen percent of the region’s public universities had a board, compared with only 7%, 8% and 6% in the Central, Western, and Northeastern regions. The Eastern Region had the country’s largest economy, contributing to more than half of China’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2011. The other three regions were generally less developed than the eastern coastal region. They had fewer institutions and these institutions were less likely to create a board than their counterparts in the east. Those that did have a board tended to cluster in a few economic centers represented by provincial capitals such as Wuhan of Hubei Province, Chengdu of Sichuan Province, Xi’an of Shaanxi Province, and Chongqing Municipality.
In the Eastern Region, the Province of Jiangsu had 16 universities with a board, or 37% of all public institutions in the province, the highest percentage among all administrative regions, followed by Guangdong Province (30%) and Fujian Province (23%). Situated along the east coast of China, Jiangsu Province has been the second largest province in terms of GDP for the last few years. Historically, it had been one of China’s most developed regions in the Republican era in terms of industry and commerce which used to have ties with universities. It was also the most progressive province in terms of education in the Nationalist period. Guangdong Province has the largest economy among all 31 administrative regions. Both situated along the southeast coast of China, Guangdong and Fujian have traditionally been hometowns to a vast number of
overseas Chinese, who used to be supportive of educational development in their hometowns. Among all four municipalities, Beijing, the capital, had the highest number of universities (11 in total, out of 56) with a board, followed by Shanghai (which had five).

After more than 30 years of reform and opening, the board of trustees is still an organizational structure that relatively few universities (11%) have chosen to have. It is not clear whether economic development has had any impact on this choice, but it is evident that the creation of boards among Chinese public universities was not evenly distributed across China. The more economically developed regions tended to have a higher percentage of institutions with a board. This was particularly true in the eastern coastal region, which has also always been more open to the outside world and more likely to lead in reform movements. MOE-affiliated or line ministry-affiliated universities were more likely to create a board than provincial universities, which had relatively fewer resources compared with the other two types of institutions.

5.1.2 Time of creation

Based on information from institutional websites, the year in which a university created a board could be confirmed for 79 universities among the 84. Figure 5.2 shows the number of new boards created each year from 1978 (when the first public board was created) to 2011 (when the first phase of this study was completed). Some clear patterns in terms of the timing of board development emerge.

At the start of the reform era in 1978, Jinan University of Guangdong Province was the first to resume its board which was dissolved during the Cultural Revolution. Very few boards were created during the following years probably because China at the time was in the process of restoring order within its education system. Up until 1987, all the five universities that had created a board were located in Guangdong and Fujian Provinces (which are in Southeast China, north of Hong Kong with Taiwan Island across the strait) and they all had strong ties with overseas Chinese. Most of the board members at the time were Chinese expatriates. According to information from the websites of these universities, for example, the board in Huaqiao University played a “decision-making” (juece, in Chinese) and “auditing” (shenyi, in Chinese) role for important university affairs (Huaqiao University, n.d.); the same was true for the board of Shantou University (Shantou University, 2013). At Shaoguan University, the aim of the board
was to “gain support from the society and raise funds”. It should also be noted that in 1985 the CCP’s *Decisions on Reforming the Educational System* was issued, which started the formal decentralization process and encouraged external ties. There was a small surge in newly created boards from 1985 to 1989, not only in expatriate-sponsored universities but also in three other institutions which were affiliated with line ministries.

**Figure 5.2** Number of New Boards Created Each Year and Policy Orientation (1978–2011)

Available data suggested that no boards were created during the first two years following the Tian’anmen incident of 1989. Universities at the time were cautious not only because of the strengthened ideological control from the center but also because higher education in China was experiencing great difficulties when the negative impact of the market economy began to surface.

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17 This citation was extracted from the board charter which was retrieved from the institution’s website during the first phase of this study, on March 9, 2011, from http://top.sgu.edu.cn/tzb/dongshi/index.asp. The link was later found to have been disabled when this thesis was being written.
There was a noticeable lack of investment in higher education (Pan, 2003). Nonetheless, with the renewed efforts of economic reform underway starting in 1992, universities continued to carry out market-oriented reforms. In that year, a provincial university established its board when it was newly created by the merging of six provincial universities. This merger ushered in an era of merging and restructuring of higher education institutions in China (S. Yu, Li, Ni, & Li, 2008).

There was a sharp increase in the number of new boards after 1993. In 1994 alone, 11 new boards were established, the biggest surge ever, as of the date of this study. After that, the number of new boards dropped gradually, but still, on average, five new boards were created each year for the following four years. The rapid increase in the number of boards coincided with the policy orientation at the time. An important policy document of 1993, *China’s Education Reform and Development Guidelines* (Ministry of Education, 1993), marked the acceleration of market reform, which keenly encouraged university-industry collaboration and invited social forces to finance education. In 1994, the State Council’s implementation strategies for the *Development Guidelines* underscored that ministry-affiliated universities should expand their social service and financing channels, strengthen ties with the local government, industry and other social forces, and improve their ability to adapt to various demands from the society (Ministry of Education, 1994). Based on the situations of individual universities, reforms were designed so that different approaches could be used, such as sponsorship by central ministries, by a combination of central ministries and local government, by local government, by industry joining in management, and by university alliance or merger. Within this policy context, there was renewed interest in the use of a board of trustees as a way of collaborating with society. Between 1994 and 1998, a majority of the 32 newly created boards were from MOE- or ministry-affiliated institutions.

With the country’s economy gaining development momentum, the State Council put emphasis on research, innovation, and technology transfer in its education action plan of 1999, encouraging deeper level university–industry collaboration. Rapid enrollment expansion also started that year. At the same time, a new higher education system began to take shape, involving a mechanism of two-tier administration from the central and local governments with the latter playing the main role. There was a steady increase in new boards every year during this rapid expansion period (1999-2004), although it was not as dramatic as in previous years. Provincial universities accounted for 64% of newly created boards during this period.
New boards continued to spring up in a faster pace (at about four per year) in the latter half of the 2000s and into the early 2010s. Again, provincial universities dominated the list, accounting for 69% of new boards. It is important to note that another education action plan that was introduced in 2004 pledged to step up efforts to build world-class universities and improve the quality of education in key disciplines (Ministry of Education, 2004a). From 2007 to 2009, the central government noticeably favored universities that were affiliated with the MOE which traditionally represented better quality. The growth rate of government grants to these universities far exceeded that of their self-generated funds (Gao, Qu, & Yang, 2011). In relative terms, provincial universities did not receive the same proportion of government funding. It is not certain whether the surge of new boards among provincial universities had anything to do with the lack of funding from the government and the desire to increase other possible sources of revenue, but apparently they were more active than before in involving other social sectors.

The creation of boards of trustees seems to be closely associated with the reform policies and measures at the time, not only in the field of education but also in relation to the overall economic development and political situation in the country. This was particularly the case at the beginning of reform, after the Tian’an men incident, and at the turn of the century. Universities’ choices followed policies and political directions. When funds from the center dwindled and when ties with industry and society were encouraged, a small number of universities tended to try new things such as creating a board; when political invention intensified, universities tended not to take adventures. It is important to understand what has happened to these boards and in what ways they contribute to the universities that created them. The following section on questionnaire findings offers at least partial answers to these questions.

As a new addition to the organizational structure of public universities, the board of trustees is not a rarity since 11% of universities have established a board since 1978. However, surprisingly, this study found that no government policy had ever made reference to the board of regular public HEIs until 2010, more than 30 years later, when the National Guidelines 2010-2020 were issued, and even in this policy document, the reference was merely a term without any explanation. This is an interesting phenomenon because the Chinese government is notorious for giving directives and orders. Consequently, the decision to create a board, the role it could play, and how it would function seems to have been left to the hands of individual institutions. The State’s tacit permission for local improvisation coincides with Heilmann and Perry’s (2011a)
observation of adaptive governance on the part of the Chinese leadership, or the CCP. How much a board can be involved in institutional governance is also at the discretion of the institution’s leadership, albeit the foundational institutional governance frameworks were put into place by the State. It is likely that more boards will be created in the future, given that they were explicitly encouraged in the *National Guidelines* of 2010, especially when clearer guidelines were given in the 2014 regulations on boards.

5.2 **Findings from Phase 2**

Phase 2 of the study involved a questionnaire for universities having a board. They were asked such questions as the composition of the board, administrative offices for the board, frequency of board meetings, and board member selection criteria and processes. Board charters and board member lists were also collected from a number of participating institutions.

5.2.1 **Size and composition of boards**

Of the 40 universities that responded to the survey, 29 boards had increased in size from the time when they were created, four universities had reduced the size of their boards, and the size of two boards remained the same.18 An MOE-affiliated university had the smallest board with 15 members while the largest board with 433 members was at a provincial university. The median board size was 87 members. Generally speaking, MOE- or other ministry-affiliated universities tended to have smaller boards (Table 5.2).

In comparison with public boards in other countries (governing boards in particular), Chinese boards in general had more members. The American public board is generally comprised of 11 to 12 voting members and that number was relatively stable from 1986 to 2010 (AGB, 2010b). Private boards tend to be larger, though, at an average of 29 (AGB, 2010a). Sizes of most sounding boards (i.e., advisory councils) in the U.S. range from 11 to 30 members (Worth, 2008). In Canada, the average size of governing boards is 27 members (Jones, 2002). The Australian board is recommended to have no more than 22 members (Universities Australia, 2013). In the

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18 It was not possible to make this comparison regarding the other five boards because relevant information was not provided in the questionnaire.
UK, a maximum of 25 members is believed to represent good governance practice (Committee of University Chairs, 2009). However, the Chinese boards may not exercise the same governing authority as those in the above-mentioned countries. Board members could be recruited for various purposes, for example, donations, professional expertise, connections, or status. A large board may be effective as long as the board members serve their purpose on the board and fulfil the particular responsibilities expected of them. It is not yet known whether the relatively large size of Chinese boards has any impact on their functioning and operation.

Table 5.2 Size of Boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>All institutions</th>
<th>Size of boards (no. board members)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Type #</td>
<td>Largest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOE-affiliated</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliated with other Ministries or central government units</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of board composition, it is not easy to provide a full picture. Respondents were asked four subsets of questions: (a) the numbers of internal and external board members; (b) the numbers of board members coming from the university administration and faculty; (c) the number of board members coming from government, industry, and other fields; and (d) the number of members from mainland China, from special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macao) and Taiwan, as well as from other foreign countries. Responses to these questions were the least complete among all responses to the questionnaire. Because secretariats were selective in answering this set of questions, there were considerable missing data. Table 5.3 provides a summary of responses based on valid questionnaires. For example, 31 secretariats provided numbers for their internal members and external members; therefore, the percentage of internal members and external members was based on data from these 31 institutions. The percentage of members’ nationalities was calculated according to the 24 returned questionnaires that provided responses to that question.
Despite some missing information, the available data in Table 5.3 did show three common characteristics. First, board members were predominantly (94%) from outside of the university, which showed the boards’ strong orientation towards external stakeholders. What roles they played is not known, but undoubtedly institutions set up external connections through their boards. Second, the largest component of these external board members was corporate members representing corporations and industry groups. This was especially true for universities which were currently or in the past affiliated with ministries other than the MOE. Some boards were almost entirely composed of representatives of enterprises from the same industry. By contrast, the traditional comprehensive universities appeared to have preferred individual members to corporate members on their boards. Third, another major category of board members, albeit less extensive, were members from governments or their agencies (18%) with, for example, the provincial governor, vice governor, or director of the Educational Commission as chair of the board. Government officials and representatives from businesses were not just from the local area. Some, and, in certain cases, many, were officials of central government agencies and national companies based in other provinces. Large representations from industries and governments demonstrate the importance of universities keeping close connections with these organizations. Further investigation would be needed in order to understand in what ways these two categories of members contributed to the universities. (The third phase of this study, i.e., the interviews with board secretariat staff, offered at least partial answers to this question.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. valid surveys</th>
<th>Membership categories</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31 (all members)</td>
<td>External member</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal member</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 (internal members)</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 (external members)</td>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>government</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other fields</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 (member’s nationality)</td>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hong Kong/Macao/Taiwan</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign nationals</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another note on the composition of boards is related to institutions traditionally sponsored by overseas Chinese. Among the 24 universities which provided the breakdown of their board membership in terms of members’ nationality, six institutions were located in Guangdong and Fujian provinces which are the traditional hometowns for overseas Chinese. Their boards had a large representation of foreign members as well as members from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, accounting for 89% and 84% of the total respectively. Another national university had all its board members from these two categories and did not have mainland Chinese members.

5.2.2 Board meetings

There was considerable variation in the frequency and length of board meetings reported by institutions (see Table 5.4). According to respondents, fifty-five percent of the boards convened a meeting once a year. One fifth of the boards convened once every two years. Two universities reported that they had not had a meeting in years although a meeting was supposed to be convened once a year according to their board charters. Over half of board meetings would last half a day to one day.

Table 5.4 Frequency and Length of Board Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>No. institutions</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>No. institutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Once per year</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Half day</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice per year</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>One day</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once every two years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>One and half day</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once every three years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two days</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once every four years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>By agenda</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As needed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No meetings in years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No meetings in years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To some extent, this table seems to suggest that by and large these boards did not meet frequently as a collective body. More than 30 percent of the boards met no more than once every two years or did not meet at all. Judging from news reports about board meetings on institutional websites, these meetings were an attention-grabbing event on campus and sometimes they were hosted by corporate board members in a different city. Given the large representation of members coming from outside of the city or province where a university was situated, it may be
reasonable to assume that to host such a meeting would require a great deal of coordination, not to mention that over half of these meetings lasted one to two days. Because universities did not make their board meeting agendas publicly available, it is unclear exactly how those half-day, one-day, and even two-day board meetings proceeded. This concentrated meeting time raises questions as to how communication takes place between an institution and its widely distributed members when the board meetings are convened infrequently.

5.2.3 Administrative offices responsible for board affairs

As was mentioned in Chapter 4 on data collection methods, board secretariats in Chinese universities are usually subordinate to another administrative office. Among the 40 institutions included in the second phase of this study, the board affairs of one university were under the administration of the Secretariat of the Board, Alumni and Educational Foundation. In seven universities, the central University Office (which combines the President’s Office and the Office of the Party Committee) was in charge of board affairs, and most of these offices also took responsibility for alumni affairs and educational foundation affairs, or some combination of both. Because universities did not follow a uniform organizational structure, many of the offices in charge of board affairs (other than the University Office) may have had overlapping responsibilities but used different names. When the names of these offices were translated into English, the most frequently used words or phrases were “cooperation” (hezuo in Chinese) and “development” (fazhan in Chinese), both appearing 12 times. A complete list of terms used to describe these offices is presented in Table 5.5. Half of these offices were in charge of affairs for the board, alumni and educational foundation all at the same time. In the seven institutions traditionally supported by overseas Chinese, the responsible office also administered affairs related to Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and overseas Chinese, including all four foreign affairs offices in Table 5.5.

The names of these offices and the frequency of words used in the names provide at least some sense of the role expected of a board. The board seems to be a nexus which is largely oriented towards the university’s collaboration with and financing from external stakeholders, as the top three frequently used terms would suggest. The role of the board may also have similarities with a social outreach program, providing services and exchanging resources. These names did not suggest that the board was playing a significant role in governance in terms of setting the mission
or strategic direction, or reviewing the financial situation, of the university. Subordination to a second-tier administrative office in most cases could also suggest the board was never designed to play a significant role in institutional decision-making.

Table 5.5 Words and Phrases Used in the Names of Administrative Offices Responsible for Supporting the Boards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hezuo</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Fazhan</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Duiwai</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lianluo</td>
<td>Liaison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Xiaoban</td>
<td>University Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Waishi ban</td>
<td>Foreign Affairs Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Xiaoyou ban</td>
<td>Alumni Affairs Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Shehui</td>
<td>Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Fuwu</td>
<td>Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jiaoliu</td>
<td>Exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Xiaoyou hui ji jiaoyu jijin hui</td>
<td>Alumni and Educational Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Guonei</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gang’ aotai haiwai huaren</td>
<td>Hong Kong-Macao-Taiwan-Overseas Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chanye</td>
<td>Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chan xue yan</td>
<td>Industry-teaching-research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Guoji</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dangwei</td>
<td>Party Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ziyuan</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mishu chu</td>
<td>Secretariat of the Board</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire also asked about the number of administrative staff assigned responsibility for board-related matters. Responses from 38 institutions varied from one to eleven (see Table 5.6). The average was 3.7 persons. Less than half of the boards (18 universities) designated two or three persons for board affairs. The largest board (which had 433 members) had the most people working in support of its activities.
Table 5.6 Number of Staff Responsible for Board-Related Matters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. staff</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. institutions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average no. staff</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.7</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2.4 Selection and appointment of board members

Generally speaking, respondents gave very broad descriptions of the selection and appointment of board members. One prominent criterion for selecting membership was that candidates should have social influence, such as government officials, social elite, renowned scholars, entrepreneurs, or famous alumni. Candidates for corporate membership should be financially sound, have a good reputation, or have research or cooperative education programs with the university. Four respondents mentioned that individuals or corporations that had donated a certain amount of money (or gifts in kind) were eligible to become members.

Based on a total of 31 responses on how board members were nominated, the nomination of board members can be summarized as follows: (a) by the board secretariat or the office responsible for board matters (seven institutions); (b) by senior university administration (three institutions) or Party Committee (one institution); (c) by the board (three institutions) or its standing or executive councils (two institutions), the board chair (one institution), or current board members (four institutions); (d) by self-recommendation and voluntary application (three institutions); and (e) by a combination of two approaches (four institutions, such as by senior administration and board members), or various approaches (three institutions). The final decisions usually resided in board meetings or meetings of the executive board. In five universities, university leaders (such as the president or the party secretary) or collective leadership made these decisions. In two cases, the provincial or city government approved the membership. In one university that was affiliated with a central government agency, the list of candidates was submitted to the agency and members were appointed jointly by the agency and the provincial government.

Apparently, judging from the questionnaire responses, there was a lack of clarity and definite terms of reference for member selection and appointments, although this was probably because
questionnaire respondents did not have the time or intent to give a fuller answer to this question. Presumably, ambiguity in the terms of reference could also provide flexibility when choosing members. It may be interesting to investigate how flexibility in member selection was exercised and who finally had the authority to exercise it. A closer look at the board charters of participating institutions was then necessary and helpful for understanding the role of the board.

5.2.5 Board charters

As formal institutional documents, board charters are probably the most illuminating documents about the role of the board because they are supposed to spell out such important details as the status of the board, its composition and terms of reference for board membership, duties and obligations, etc. The researcher attempted to obtain board charters and board member lists from all the 84 universities which this study identified as having a board, by looking for them on these institutions’ websites. Less than half of them chose to post the charters (49%) or member lists (43%) online (see Table 5.7). It seemed that institutions that participated in this study were more willing to share board-related information with the public than those that refused to participate or did not reply. Generally speaking, institutions were more likely to withhold membership information. Only 33 institutions (39%) had both charters and membership information on their websites.

Table 5.7 Availability of Board Charters and Member Lists on Institutional Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation status</th>
<th>Charters (%)</th>
<th>Membership (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions that participated</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions that refused, did not respond, or could not be reached</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=84

Among the 40 universities that participated, the researcher obtained board charters from 35 universities. These charters usually included the objective and rationale for creating a board, the
function of the board, organization of the board, and member rights and obligations. Generally speaking, the board was designated an advisory or consultative (zixun, in Chinese) role, and 80% of the charters explicitly used this term in their introductory section where the role of the board was defined. Fifteen charters mentioned that the board had a deliberative (shenyi in Chinese) function and nine charters assigned the board a monitoring or supervisory (jiandu in Chinese) role. The board was expected to play these roles with regard to important decisions that the institution was to make. For example, the most commonly mentioned institutional decisions involved strategic plans, academic programs, talent training models, quality assurance, and cooperation and exchange with external actors. However, virtually no board charters explained what “advisory”, “consultative”, “deliberative”, or “monitoring” meant; these were simply four general terms used in the charters without further elaboration. The board would also be an important medium to help raise funds, according to the introductory section of 15 charters. The charters clearly suggested that the board was not a decision-making body in the institution.

The introduction section of the charters was usually devoted to explaining why the university chose to create a board. The objective of creating a board usually contained four broad themes: (a) to carry out national policies, (b) to establish a mechanism by which the government was the main educational provider complemented by other social forces, (c) to promote ties with society and to provide mutual benefits, and (d) to improve capacity for providing quality education.

These cited rationales for creating a board sounded very much like responses to government reform policies, such as devolving financial responsibilities to institutions, encouraging non-governmental forces to participate in educational initiatives, and bringing in market forces to higher education institutions. Both Section 2.3.2 of Chapter 2 and Section 5.1.2 of this chapter reviewed these policy trends. It is not known which rationale would be the main one for a university to create its board and whether there were other considerations involved in each case.

What seems certain, though, was that the creation of boards was believed to bring mutual benefits to both the institution and the board members who represented social forces, as was shown by the third rationale cited earlier. This practice was acknowledged and even encouraged in charters. A closer look at how the charters defined the rights and obligations of board members and of the institution may offer some clue regarding these mutual benefits.
The 35 collected charters mentioned member rights and obligations, mostly in separate sections in bullet form and some in combination with the responsibilities of the board in general. These rights and obligations for members were more or less the same across institutions, although there were variations to some degree and some of them were specific to a particular institution. It could be the case that not all rights and obligations were listed in a charter; nonetheless, a closer look at them based on how many references were made to them in all the charters may shed some light on the relationship between board members and the university they served. Apart from the rights that members could enjoy related to the functioning of the board itself, such as voting and voluntarily joining the board (or resigning their membership), board members had a myriad of rights which this researcher categorized by theme (see Table 5.8). The numbers in parentheses beside each broad theme suggest the number of charters that referenced this member right. Obviously, board charters included in this study emphasized members’ rights to access university resources (in 31 charters), research collaboration with the university (in 29 charters), and collaboration in training and continuing education (in 29 charters). They also granted privileges to members (in 26 charters). Each broad theme may have more than one sub-theme and the number preceding each sub-theme in the table indicates the number of charters that included this thematic right.

In Table 5.8, there were more references to the rights of members to recruit university graduates and receive customized training programs (each appearing in 29 charters) than other rights, followed closely by receiving favorable technology transfer benefits (in 27 charters) and consultation services (in 24 charters). These rights were closely related to universities’ core mission of teaching, research, and service. Clearly these were major benefits to board members for participation and they signaled institutions’ desire to establish a relationship with external stakeholders, and those in industry in particular, that was collaborative and two-way. It would be too arbitrary and naïve to say that the number of references in charters means that an item is more important or more a common practice than others, but the emphasis these charters gave to these rights collectively tends to give the impression that they overshadowed the right to listen to the president’s report on university development (in 23 charters).
Table 5.8 Rights of Board Members According to the Charters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad themes(^a)</th>
<th>Frequency(^b)</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Board funds</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Review/decide/ monitor the use of Board funds collected from members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President’s report</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Listen to president’s report on university development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching (17)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Be a professor (honorary, guest, adjunct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jointly create colleges, centers, training bases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Request to open programs in the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Be a student supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Give talks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research (29)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Receive favorable technology transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Request help with research problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Jointly conduct research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to university resources (31)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Recruit university graduates first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Receive consultation services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Use university facilities (libraries, labs, gyms, equipment, space, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Request information services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Extend business network through university platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Join conferences, research trips, and visits organized by university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Promote business through university platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Receive information about university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and continuing education (29)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Receive customized training for individual and corporate members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jointly provide training programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jointly recruit students for certificate or degree programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and enterprises (13)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jointly open business enterprises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sell products and services to university first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jointly bid for projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors for big contributions (18)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Be written into university history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Be given naming rights for buildings, labs, awards, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Be remembered by permanent monuments or stone inscriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Be documented in university archive permanently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Be given honorary titles or positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Be given permanent member status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privileges (26)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Receive preferential treatment in admissions for relatives or employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Receive assistance for accommodation and transportation when visiting the university or city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Receive assistance for accommodation and transportation when visiting China (overseas members)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Use medical facilities for diagnosis and treatment of illnesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Be considered favorably in scholarship/award competition for enrolled relatives or employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Publish articles in university-run journals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) The number in parentheses suggests the number of charters that referenced this broad theme. \(^b\) This column indicates the number of charters that referred to a specific sub-theme.

Economic interests were also something that board members could cultivate through membership. For example, in addition to enjoying, either for free or for a lower fee, the many
resources and facilities that the university had, individual members or corporate members of ten boards could also make business deals or jointly set up enterprises with the university. They had the privilege of being considered as top potential providers of products and services that the university might purchase, according to five charters. Gaining status was another common right that board members could have, as was shown by the 17 references to being written into the university’s history and other measures that recognized their major contributions to the university.

While the afore-mentioned rights largely speak to collective benefits that members could have, the last broad theme in Table 5.8 suggests that board members at some universities also had access to private benefits. Being treated favorably in university admissions, either for the admission of their relatives or employees, appeared as a right in 24 charters, even more frequently than listening to university reports (in 23 charters) or reviewing and overseeing the funds they contributed to the university board (in 22 charters). This could be regarded a significant benefit, especially given the high level of competition that Chinese students faced in university admissions in the past or to key national universities at present, if these preferential admissions are still practiced. Other privileges, such as getting help (medical treatment and accommodation and transportation when travelling to the city or country), also indicate the great importance that universities placed on cultivating a relationship with their board members, by mobilizing university resources.

The charters also listed members’ obligations, most of which closely corresponded to their rights. For example, listening to the president’s report would match the responsibility of providing consultation and guidance on the university’s future development, programs, and key construction projects; receiving training for the members themselves or their employees would also mean giving priority to the university when choosing a program provider; opening new degree programs to meet the needs of enterprise corresponded with the responsibility of giving advice on market needs; the privilege to choose graduates for employment earlier than others also meant that members were expected to support the university’s graduate employment. What seems to stand out in these responsibilities is that members were assigned a role for fundraising in all 35 charters, either by making their own contributions or by encouraging others to do so. Fifteen charters explicitly stated in the introductory section that their board was a medium for fundraising. Four charters listed this responsibility first in the bullet points about obligations.
Making donations was a requirement in order to be considered for board membership, and donations were required to sustain membership, according to four charters. Two charters mentioned that members would be charged a fee to cover the operational costs of the board.

Rights and obligations on the part of board members reflected the relationship between them and the university. By and large, both the institution and the board members had vested interests in the work of the board. On the part of the institutions, these interests were more or less related to the institution as a whole. By contrast, the interests of the board members could be both for the public good (e.g., for society, for business operations) and for private needs (e.g., receiving preferential treatment in admissions or scholarships, etc.). This practice of bringing material benefits to board members is in sharp contrast to the original idea of governing boards in the West. The AGB (2010c) believed that individual board members should “avoid even the perception of any personal agendas or special interests” (p. 8) and that they are not supposed to advocate for their constituency. In this sense, the Chinese board members are more like Form 1 external stakeholders who, according to Amaral and Magalhães (2002), interact with institutions primarily based on market demands.

The board charters examined in this study often described the process of selecting or appointing the chair of the board. Candidates for the chair could be put forward by the university or by the board. In one institution, candidates would need to be first approved by the MOE before an election could take place at board meetings. In another institution which had a strong industry background, the chair was to be determined after consultation between the university, the ministry in charge of the industry, and the provincial government. According to the charters, the selection of board chair for 21 boards would be through consultation and/or election at board meetings; for another seven boards, the chair was ex officio in that the position was held by an individual in a particular official capacity, such as the university president, governor of the province, mayor of the city, or vice governor or vice mayor who had education under his or her portfolio.

Twelve charters mentioned that the board had a standing committee (changwu dongshihui in Chinese) that would meet every six months or once in a year and could exercise partial authority (in a few cases, full authority) on behalf of the board when the board meeting was not in session, for example, making decisions on adding or removing members or other board-related issues
(e.g., determining the date for board meetings). Eight charters specified the composition of the standing committee, usually made up of board chair, vice chair(s), standing board members, and sometimes the board secretary. Four boards had a Chair’s Council (zhuxi huiyi in Chinese) that was assigned similar authority to the standing committee. Twenty charters also mentioned that the board could set up committees as it deemed necessary. Commonly mentioned committees included a research collaboration committee, a talent training collaboration committee, a graduate employment committee, and a board foundation committee. There were no further references to these committees in the charters. The composition or mandate of these committees could not be found on institutional websites.

Perhaps the least clear items in these charters were references to (or frequently a lack of reference to) the size of the board and the process for selecting members. All charters had specifications on how members should be appointed. However, none of the charters defined the size of the board, and no charter specified the proportion of each membership category. The criteria for member selection were also vague and general. This perhaps explains why questionnaire respondents gave only broad selection criteria on the questionnaire. The lack of clarity and precise rules about membership, one can reasonably assume, was likely to provide a high level of discretion to the senior administration of the university in terms of determining the size of the board, whom to select for board members, and so forth. In addition, membership exit rules and procedures were not clearly articulated in the charters, which led to the impression that again the administration had much latitude with regard to the removal of members.

It should be noted that among the 35 charters included in this study, not every charter clearly defined how the board operated. For example, six charters did not specify how the chair was selected; although almost all charters mentioned that a board secretariat was created to administer board affairs, only one third of the charters pointed out which administrative office the secretariat was affiliated with; only seven charters made it clear that members should designate a point of contact with the board secretariat; six charters laid out the procedures for members to resign; five charters indicated what procedures to follow if members were not able to attend board meetings; only two charters specified the quorum for a meeting to be convened; and just three charters defined the quorum for a meeting to be eligible to pass motions. Although all charters explained how candidates could become members, very few mentioned under what
conditions members should resign or could be removed from the board and what procedures to follow in those cases.

Admittedly, a lack of specificity on certain things does not necessarily indicate that there are no informally understood practices; in the same vein, even if a charter lays out a procedure, it does not necessarily mean that the procedure will be followed. However, as a normative piece and something that prescribes the board and its operation, it would seem essential to mention and elaborate on the basic “rules” for the board to be operative. When some universities were contacted in 2011 for information on which office was responsible for board matters so that this survey could be sent to the appropriate authority, two universities were not able to provide an answer. Another university reported that no one was in charge of board matters because the person who used to do the work left the office without handing over the matter to another person. Six universities reported that they were not able to answer the survey questions because their boards had long since become non-functional. Even among universities which completed the survey, several mentioned that the board had not been in operation for the past few years. These incidents raise concerns about the functioning of the board and consequently its relationship with the institution it was supposed to serve. Board charters offered normative prescriptions about the role of the boards, but their actual practices were not discernible from the charters. This was why interviews with secretariat staff were necessary.

To a significant degree, board charters were characterized by considerable ambiguity on key matters. There was no substantive definition of the role of the board, member selection criteria, or a quorum. The role of the board, as well as its operation, seemed to be a fluid matter without clear-cut boundaries. This handling of formal prescriptive documents reflects the guerrilla policy style that Heilmann and Perry (2010a) have observed with regards to the governance mode of the CCP. When it comes to institutional governance, especially to new and foreign practices such as the board of trustees, even in supposedly normative board charters, university leadership has created the flexibility to adapt the board to changing needs.

The charters also seem to suggest that the relationship between the institution and board members is largely interest-based. The board is supposed to advance the interests of both. In a stakeholder society (Neave, 2002), there is probably a good reason for pursuing tangible mutual benefits and using that common objective as a basis for collaboration and improvement, as seen
in the rights and obligations that the charters have clearly outlined. In these charters, the apparently fuzzy and less emphasized role of the board as an advisory or supervisory body, or a gathering of external members for the public good, seems to have been obscured. This could be understandable in light of Verdery’s (1991) observation about the communist party-state. It is unlikely that actors from the social sphere can have a significant impact on institutional governance when a party bureaucracy is in place between the state and the institution and inside the institution itself.

5.3 Summary

Although the first public board appeared immediately following the reform and opening up in the late 1970s, the development of boards in China’s public higher education institutions continues to be slow and uneven. Only 11% of public institutions had created a board at the time of this study and most of them were situated in economically developed regions. At the frontier for economic reform and opening up to overseas investments, these regions (especially the east coastal region) have a tradition of taking the lead in trying new things under foreign influences. Boards were also concentrated in MOE-affiliated institutions, suggesting their desire and capability to mobilize resources, thanks to their prestige in the Chinese higher education hierarchy. It would be interesting to see if these distribution patterns will change in the future, when institutional governance reform is deepened and calls on more participation from external stakeholders. Boards’ development over the last 30 years has indicated a strong correlation between the creation of public boards and policy orientations at the time. However, one has to wonder whether the creations of some boards were hasty and not much consideration was given to the operational mechanisms and sustainability of these boards, given the evidence obtained during the data collection for this study that some boards had become literally non-functional.

Chinese public boards were fairly large, primarily composed of external stakeholders from business, industry, and government. 19 With these many external members from different places in China and abroad, one is tempted to think that organizing a board meeting could be

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19 By contrast, government officials are not allowed to be on the governing board of private institutions (Ministry of Education, 2004b).
challenging, though board meetings were usually held at most once a year. The nomination process for board members varied largely among boards, though none of them seemed to have clearly defined rules for selection criteria and processes. In view of the large size of boards, clear guidelines for member selection is crucial for managing them and making sure the expectations of candidates are clearly communicated and understood by both the university and the member candidates.

Board-related matters were usually assigned to a secretariat, which was often affiliated with one administrative office in the university. However, judging from the difficulties of finding out which office was responsible for board matters during the first two phases of the study, it seems that some boards were not functioning normally. A closer look at the names of their affiliated offices indicated that they were largely involved in collaboration, development, and liaison. This perhaps indicated the expected role of those boards in different institutions. The board appeared to be mostly a means for universities to connect with external resources.

The Chinese public board seems to be a secretive unit in many institutions, if not in all of them. For example, information about boards, such as board charters and membership lists in particular, was unavailable on many institutional websites. Board charters, the defining documents for university boards, were also vague in terms of describing their membership (size, composition, selection, and resignation) as well as the operational aspects of the board. In terms of the role of the board, the charters usually only used abstract terms without defining what they meant.

The most revealing evidence about the role of Chinese public boards came from their charters. Evaluated in terms of the ideal-type model that was constructed in Section 3.3.2 of Chapter 3, the Chinese board is likely the result and means of incorporating external stakeholders through mutual benefits. This is a departure from the American board which advocates restraint from pursuing private interests, especially for board members. The supervisory or advisory role of the Chinese board is much less prominent, given the ubiquitous and controlling party bureaucracy in both system and institutional governance arrangements. Considerable ambiguity was found in these charters with regards to key issues, and this can be seen as a form of adaptive governance. The state opted not to give directives, leaving much room for individual institutions to experiment with the concept and practices of a board. An ambiguous charter makes all this possible. Institutions therefore could “test” the board—a new and foreign concept—without
being limited by or confined to institutionalized norms and formal rules. The state, on the other hand, also had the flexibility to monitor the institutions.

Given this ambiguity in formal documents, interviews were conducted with the secretariat staff focusing on the role of the board and its current practices. Findings from these interviews will be presented and analyzed in the next chapter.
Chapter 6
Interview Findings and Analysis

A main objective of this study was to explore the role of the board of trustees from the perspectives of those who were directly involved in board-related matters, such as board members and board secretariat staff. These people had the vantage point of looking at the board closely from their personal experiences and perceptions rather than an outsider’s prescriptions. Given the actual difficulty of recruiting board members for the study, board secretariat staff became the main source of data for the third phase of this study. In total, 37 board secretariat staff from 37 universities that participated in the questionnaire were interviewed. The main research questions included: (a) How does the board contribute to the work of the university? (b) How do board members benefit from their work with the university? (c) What are the challenges associated with operating a board? and (d) What is the relationship between the board and the university as well as its stakeholders such as the state and society?

Following Patton’s methods for interview data analysis (Patton, 2002), the study first used open coding and then systematic coding, and then it organized data according to common themes and patterns. This chapter reports and analyzes findings from the interview data, pointing out four emerging themes related to the role of the board as perceived by board secretariat staff. During her field trip, the researcher also had an opportunity to have informal conversations with two academics who were involved in the drafting of the National Guidelines 2010-2020. Insights from these conversations are presented and discussed in Section 6.6 of this chapter.

6.1 Role 1 of the board

6.1.1 The board as a platform for university–industry collaboration

An important theme emerging from the interview data was that the fundamental role for the board of trustees is university–industry collaboration. The most frequent words that interview participants used to describe this role of the board were “platform”, “interface”, “medium”, “nexus”, and “basis” for collaboration. This collaboration might cover a wide range of activities, such as research, technology transfer, student intern placements, graduate employment, and
personnel training, which are the traditional industry-teaching-research ties that universities set up with society as described by Xiwei Zhong and Yang (2006). According to interview participants, their universities’ collaboration with industry brought mutual benefits to both parties. For example, in terms of research, a director from the Board Office of a provincial institution mentioned that some national (but locally-based) companies had first-class key national laboratories. When they collaborated with the university and jointly applied for competitive national research grants, both the university and the companies had a very high chance of securing those grants, raising each other’s research capacity and national profile. Another interviewee who was director of the President’s Office at a provincial university commented that because some listed companies were required to invest a certain amount in research and development, they actively looked for research collaboration opportunities with universities, either as a sponsor for or a partner in research, by becoming a board member of the university. The director also mentioned that his university would also help corporate members solve their technical difficulties and problems through collaborative research with these companies.

Another aspect that almost all interviewees mentioned with regards to collaboration involved student internships and graduate employment placements. Corporate members tended to be more willing to host student interns than non-member companies, according to nine interviewees. Through this collaboration, corporate members got to know their students better, and it increased the chances for them to employ the university graduates. A director of the board office at a national university alluded to an instance where a team of student interns led by a professor helped solve a very difficult technical problem for a corporate member. The company was very impressed and expanded their internship program with the university. As for graduate employment, one interviewee even regarded this collaboration as “the most practical and substantive” relationship between the university and its board members. The employment rate of students was one of the key performance indicators used to evaluate university leaders. If corporate members favored their graduates, that would alleviate employment pressures for the university. Corporate board members were allowed to choose the university’s graduates ahead of non-member companies in new hires. Other interviewees viewed this as universities providing highly qualified people to companies. To facilitate the hiring process, universities would
organize special career fairs for corporate board members so that they could choose graduates first. Two board office directors said that, because their universities were previously affiliated with the dissolved Ministry of the Coal Industry, their graduates were particularly well-received among their corporate members which were mostly related to the coal industry. Their students were considered hard-working and generally understood the industry better than graduates from other universities. Two other interviewees made similar comments. Their institutions were supervised by the Ministry of Railways before they became provincial universities, but they maintained strong ties with the industry and recruited board members largely from it. Corporate members provided stable placement for university graduates. Interestingly, all four interviewees mentioned that when their university alumni took up leadership positions in the industry, such as by becoming government officials or company leaders, the bond between the university and the industry would be strengthened and collaboration in terms of receiving graduates would be promoted. Through the board, universities could maintain and benefit from the ongoing connection with the line ministries and sectors that formerly controlled these institutions.

The third and fourth dimensions of collaboration were related to personnel training and technology transfer. Training worked both ways since both universities and corporate board members could obtain new educational opportunities. Ten interview participants pointed out that their universities provided tailored training programs and even degree programs to company personnel, ranging from executives to middle-level management and staff. On the other hand, faculty of the universities received on-the-job placements from corporate board members to accumulate hands-on experience, either through research or practical work. With regard to technology transfer, it was generally acknowledged among interviewees that universities would consider technology transfer practices first with companies that had representatives sitting on their boards. As a secretariat staff commented, technology transfer could bring economic benefits to companies. Based on a collaborative relationship well-established through the board, corporate members could receive technology transfer at lower cost.

Apart from collaboration with industry (individual and corporate members from industry made up 63% of the total board membership, see Section 5.2.1 of Chapter 5), it should be noted that government officials constituted 17% of board members, the second largest constituency after industry. The role of the board as a platform for collaborating with the government and especially local governments cannot be neglected, according to nine interviewees from two
national universities and seven provincial universities. The university’s social reputation could be elevated if it had high-ranking provincial and municipal officials on its board. Most importantly, as the nine interviewees maintained, the university could have easier access to policy-makers when lobbying for government support and obtaining special attention and possibly even preferential treatment. Although 10 participants pointed out that, for corporate members, sitting on a university board could bring honor and raise their company profile, few interviewees commented on what benefits being a board member could bring to government officials or to the government. However, three interviewees referred to close ties and collaboration with the local government as a contributing factor to promote economic and social development in the region, which in turn would improve officials’ performance assessment.

Interviewees were generally optimistic about university–industry collaboration (including collaboration with government) through the board as a platform, which was believed to bring mutual benefits to both parties. Four interviewees were very much inspired by the government’s recent emphasis on “cooperative innovation” (xietao chuangxin in Chinese) and the “2011 Project” (see Section 2.4.1 of Chapter 2), an initiative which was intended to integrate innovation forces from universities and research institutes, industries and enterprises, local governments, and the international community and thus to promote universities’ capacity. They mentioned in particular that relevant government policies and subsequent funding opportunities would encourage more universities and industrial companies to engage in collaboration. Then it would be more important for the board to serve as a platform to link universities with the various fields that board members represented.

6.1.2 Challenges associated with collaboration

Interviewees noted that there were, however, challenges for linking universities with industry using the board as a platform. First, sometimes there could be a mismatch in university–industry collaboration. One secretariat staff from a national university reported that his university was apparently in a disadvantageous position because it had a stronger need for ties with industry for support than the other way round, in terms of getting research funding, securing graduate employment, and obtaining student intern placements. Under pressure from the economic challenges in 2012 and relatively high unemployment rate in the society at large, this observation was echoed by a number of interviewees. One interviewee commented that this collaboration
sounded fantastic in theory but in reality it was often very difficult to materialize. For example, his university specialized in developing new drugs; however, Chinese pharmaceutical manufacturers usually invested very little in research and development, which limited the scope of collaboration that the university could have with its corporate board members. Another interviewee from a provincial normal university said that her university had difficulty finding collaboration opportunities with board members whose business was not education-related and yet these members constituted a majority of board membership.²⁰ A mismatch on both sides of the collaboration prompted universities to revisit the role of the board in this area; they began to emphasize their willingness and ability to provide service to individual board members. Section 6.2 of this chapter discusses this new shift in detail.

Economic circumstances have a strong impact on the collaboration between a university and its board members. Two interviewees from railway-related universities reported that when the railway industry was booming as a result of the rapid development of high speed trains in China, their board members, many of whom came from that industry, were very engaged with the universities, triggering a huge demand for graduates from related programs. However, after a high speed train derailed and caused many deaths and casualties, the industry was hit hard and experienced setbacks. Board members from the industry became less interested and far less engaged with the institution. Consequently, these universities also had a hard time finding job placements for their graduates.

Even when collaborative efforts have borne fruit, for example, successfully signing off a project between the university and a corporate board member, issues may still arise, especially pertaining to project implementation. According to one interviewee, ensuring that a collaborative project is successfully carried out was a big challenge for her university. She cited challenges such as negotiating the contract, allocating and tracking funds, assessing the project, and communication problems with the company as a result of disconnection among various units that were involved in implementing a project. Although no other interviewees alluded to this implementation issue, six interviewees did acknowledge that it was difficult for the board...

²⁰ Chinese normal universities used to be teacher’s colleges, but now they offer a wider scope of programs apart from teacher education and have become more comprehensive, in response to the needs of the society (Hayhoe & Li, 2010).
secretariat to coordinate various units within the institution. For example, because collaboration with corporate board members involved a wide range of activities such as research, teaching, technology transfer, and graduate placement, many offices and divisions within the institution (e.g., faculties, the Office of Academic Affairs, the Office of Scientific Research, the Office of Student Affairs) invariably became the key actors working on behalf of the university in these relationships. However, few board secretariats had the authority to represent, or the capacity to coordinate, these offices, some of which often had higher administrative ranks than the board secretariat or its affiliated offices. According to these six interviewees, the lack of power and legitimacy on the part of the board secretariat sometimes undermined the role of the board as a nexus between the institution and its board members. In one case, a corporate member was interested in providing cooperative education programs, but because this would entail a lot of preparatory work by the academic affairs office, the faculty, and individual professors, these units were reluctant to change the existing curricular arrangements or work on something new. Although the board secretariat was very keen to promote such a tie with industry and had tried to coordinate with the various units, it did not have the authority to interfere with their ways of doing things. As a result, neither the corporate member nor the institutional units were happy with the secretariat. The interviewee (the director of the office responsible for board matters) suggested that the board secretariat or its affiliated office should hold an administrative rank at least equivalent to an assistant president if it were to effectively coordinate the various units within the university.

6.2 Role 2 of the board

6.2.1 The board as a conduit to serve board members

Queries of the 32 board charters collected from secretariats that participated in interviews indicated that the notion of fuwu (meaning “to serve” or “service”) was an important function of the university. Only four charters (one from a national university and three from provincial universities that traditionally had strong support from overseas Chinese) did not include the phrase fuwu, and 23 charters referred to the institution’s fuwu mission to society, industry, or board members as a rationale for establishing the board. The phrase fuwu appeared 104 times, and 46 of them were associated with service to individual or corporate board members.
Apparently, universities wanted to use their service to board members as leverage for obtaining support from them. Interviews with board secretariat staff provided strong support for this observation and led to some interesting discoveries about the role of the board.

Sixteen interviewees explicitly talked about the need for universities to shift to a service mentality towards board members. The logic behind this shift, quoting from two interviewees, was to “bring benefits to them so that members are more supportive of the university.” One of them (from an MOE-affiliated institution which had strong ties with industry) reported that the university leaders used to think their university was sought after by board members (which was probably the case in the past), and so they had become complacent. In his opinion, the then university president was somehow not treating board members as “partners” or “potential clients” (quotes from the interviewee); rather, he had treated them as his students because some board members were alumni of the university and students should revere their teachers in the Chinese culture. According to the interviewee, this mentality had hurt the relationship between his university and board members and it also hurt members’ feelings. Now the current university leadership realized the damage and was trying to shift towards a service mentality under the pressure of competition with other institutions.

Interviewees elaborated on how universities could serve board members. Their strategies can be summed up as (a) strengthening bonds with members, (b) knowing members’ needs, and (c) mobilizing resources to meet those needs. Bonds with members could be strengthened mostly by regular communication with them about business or private matters, either electronically or through personal visits on various occasions. This was viewed by many as setting up rapport with members. By doing so, the university could be seen by board members as caring about them and their well-being. Useful as they were, these tactics were necessary but definitely not the key. The key was to know and meet members’ needs. Universities needed to understand, through research and communication, the corporate culture of board member firms, what qualities they were looking for in university graduates and in their employees, whether they would need technical support or employee training, and even whether they had personal needs such as receiving professional development, joining a degree program, or obtaining preferential admission for their children. One interviewee mentioned that they might also accommodate members’ requests for their children to join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This is to say, university administrations should keep board members’ interests in mind and ask what
universities can do for them, commented one interviewee. As another interviewee reported, not only should the university identify board members’ needs, they should also be able to take the lead and be “forward thinking” (to quote from the interviewee), which meant identifying board members’ needs even before they themselves realized they had such a need. The final, decisive touch is to meet those needs by mobilizing the integrated resources that the university has to offer. One secretariat staff from a medical university said they would help members connect with hospitals or provide them with health consultation and services if they needed it. Seven interviewees agreed that universities needed to enhance their appeal to board members by providing services which could bring benefits to members. One director from a board office reported that his university had shifted from the asking-for-help mentality to the giving-help mentality, arguing that board members would be moved by the services they received and eventually contribute to the university. The importance of providing service to board members was perhaps best expressed by another board office director: “Passion (reqing in Chinese) and human relationships (renqing in Chinese) are important, but they need to be substantiated by real benefit (liyi in Chinese).”

While interviewees generally regarded providing benefits to board members as part of an exchange for their support, secretariat staff from institutions which traditionally enjoyed strong support from overseas Chinese told a somewhat different story about their board members. Among the 37 universities with staff participating in the interview, seven were located in the southeast coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian and a considerable number of their board members were overseas Chinese. Due to the long tradition of going abroad to make a living, these two provinces have a large number of expatriates who maintain strong ties with their hometowns and care about their economic and social development. All seven interviewees praised overseas Chinese board members for their generous contributions to the university. They all alluded to the fact that the older generation of these expatriates would support the educational course of their hometown wholeheartedly without expecting material gain from their deeds because being on a university board would be an immense honor for them. Interviewees gave a number of examples to demonstrate the altruistic motivation of these board members, for example, making large donations without strings attached, giving free lectures and paying out of their own pockets for the cost of transportation and accommodation to attend meetings, actively promoting the university to other overseas Chinese, and so forth.
However, interviewees pointed out that as more and more second- and third-generation expatriates took over their companies, universities had some difficulty maintaining the ties that the older generation had cultivated. Therefore, bringing benefits to board members became increasingly important at these universities as they attempted to develop relationships with the newest generation of expatriates. Previously, in order to show appreciation of board members’ contributions, universities gave preferential treatment to board members, for example, special gifts such as local specialties (according to two interviewees) or less stringent admissions requirements for their children or relatives (according to four interviewees). This practice had its origin in a special historical context, according to one interviewee. Many overseas Chinese living in Southeast Asian countries in the 1960s and 1970s wanted to send their children back to China for education because of strong antagonism towards Chinese in those countries. Both the central and provincial governments granted favorable admissions as a welcoming gesture. This preferential treatment had been extended to overseas board members. However, now the situation had dramatically changed. State policies emphasized equal and equitable admissions, and most importantly, the children of board members no longer had to return to China for education. The appeal of favourable admissions was fading out. Institutions had to try other ways to attract board members, for example, mobilizing available resources for them when they set up factories or businesses in the region. These resources could be highly trained personnel (i.e., students), connecting them with dignitaries, helping them solve technological problems for their companies, and so forth.

6.2.2 Challenges associated with providing services

Universities were often confronted with various challenges associated with providing services to board members or their companies. The previous section of this chapter mentioned the mismatch between the university and various industries that board members represented in terms of collaboration. Even though universities now wanted to present themselves as service providers to board members, the role of the board as a conduit for that purpose was still questionable due to universities’ limited capacity to satisfy members’ needs. A director from a national university lamented that the board of his university had not been active in recent years because the university was not able to contribute much to board members, losing the critical mass for attracting its members for meaningful engagement. Provincial universities, which are perceived
to have lower status and less influence than national universities, seemed to have more constraints in terms of their capacity to provide services. Six interviewees from provincial universities said they very often felt unable to meet the needs of corporate board members due to less capacity for research and fewer resources in comparison with national universities.

Some services or benefits to board members were no longer available due to policy changes. Before 2005, the Ministry of Education allowed universities to set aside a student admission quota outside of the national unified quota. Universities had the authority to admit students whose test scores for national matriculation exams were below the national requirements. In this way, universities could use this quota to admit board members’ children or other students that members recommended. However, in 2005, the “sunshine admission” policy was implemented and has become more stringent over the years, requiring admissions decisions to be more transparent and fair for students. Thus, universities are now left with little leeway to admit students who may not meet the required qualifications for admission. Nine interviewees admitted that to some extent this policy had taken away universities’ ability to offer preferential service to board members, and therefore being a board member had become less appealing to members and potential members alike. One interviewee (from a university with strong support from overseas Chinese) even suggested that this admission policy be reconsidered and universities be given more autonomy so that they could make decisions according to their own needs.

Service provision requires getting to know one’s clientele, and that poses a challenge for universities. Complaining about the shortage of staff dealing with board-related matters, ten interviewees reported that they did not have an adequate number of people and expertise to conduct background research on individual or corporate board members in order to find out their interests and needs, in addition to the routine work such as communicating with university administration, coordinating between board members and other divisions of the university, and receiving and hosting board member visits. Besides, staff who dealt with board matters were very often cross-appointed with other offices, most often with the Alumni Relations Office and the University Educational Foundation. A lack of full-time professional staff committed to board matters constrained the university’s ability to serve board members, commented one interviewee.
6.3 Role 3 of the board

6.3.1 The board as a source of funding

In all the 32 board charters collected from institutions which participated in interviews, the board was regarded as an institutional unit that would help the university expand its funding base by various means including: (a) partnerships in research and teaching between corporate board members and the university, (b) donations from board members, and (c) board member fundraising on behalf of the university. This role of the board was confirmed by interviewees, though most interviewees focused on the second means, some alluded to the first, and only two mentioned the third (and both of them were from universities that had strong ties with overseas Chinese). Twenty-four interviewees acknowledged that making donations was one of the most important functions of the board. However, there seemed to be subtle changes in this role of the board over time and in different universities.

While interviewees from four national universities viewed their board as playing an important role by giving donations to the university, interviewees from two other national universities alluded to the fact that this had been their boards’ most important task in the past, and now the situation had changed a little bit and their universities were putting more emphasis on providing services to board members than asking for money from them. As one of them commented, if the university could keep board members’ interests in mind and bring real benefits to them, board members would eventually return with support for the university. The other commented that in the past the university was very keen to encourage board members to donate and their donations were an important source of funding for the university. This was no longer the case, she said.

Since funding from other sources (mainly government and to a less extent alumni) was relatively sufficient, the university was becoming less reliant on financing from board members. As a result, the university was now hoping to use the board as a source of expertise to improve the university’s overall educational quality and competitiveness in terms of teaching and research as well as for the long-term development of the university.

By contrast, things did not look this rosy for some other institutions, especially provincial universities. Jiangsu and Hubei provinces are home to a large number of national and provincial universities. Three interviewees from these two provinces commented that they depended a lot
on board members’ contributions, especially for capital projects, scholarships, and student bursaries. They felt very strong competition with other provincial universities as well as operating under the shadow of more prominent national universities which appealed to both national and local businesses. On the other hand, if a provincial university had special expertise or fields of study that were closely related to industrial and economic demand, it seemed easier for this university to attract companies to sit on its board and get them to donate, commented two interviewees who thought this was the case for their universities.

Provincial universities which traditionally relied on overseas Chinese for financing still felt that contributions from board members were crucial for their university. Among the seven provincial universities included in this study, five were created with generous donations from overseas Chinese, many of whom were either on the founding board of the university or eventually became board members. One interviewee stressed that a key function of the board at his university was to mobilize others to contribute to the university. He mentioned that its overseas board members were very keen to promote the university in their own communities. They often organized social events and took advantage of other opportunities to encourage donations especially among those whose ancestors were born in the place where the university was situated.

Although contributions from overseas board members was still crucial to these universities’ well-being, three interviewees admitted that they were increasing or planning to increase the ratio of domestic and local board members in order to gain more financial support. They argued that as China was becoming economically stronger and the two provinces (Guangdong and Fujian) were economically developed areas, what used to be considered “large” donations from overseas Chinese were not that prominent any more. In addition, due to the financial difficulties in the overseas members’ local economies and the appreciation of Chinese currency in relation to their own, the ability of overseas board members to donate had been affected. Moreover, interviewees noted that the second- and third-generation board members, usually born abroad, had less attachment to their homeland and were not as keen to donate as their parents or grandparents, even when they became board members themselves. Nonetheless, according to interviewees, these universities realized that they should find new ways to renew and strengthen their ties with overseas Chinese board members.
6.3.2 Challenges associated with fundraising

Use of the board as a source of fundraising was sometimes challenging. For interviewees from three institutions (one international and two provincial), the most difficult work related to the board was to recruit new board members and thus bring additional funding to the university. Two interviewees also mentioned that because many of their corporate board members were state-owned enterprises or publicly listed companies, the decision to make a donation had to be made by the board of that company rather than by the university board member. It was almost impossible to get donations just because of having connections with one or two people from the company (such as an alumnus or alumna on the university’s board) even if these people held a powerful position in the company. Companies had checks and balances that regulated how donations could be made to a cause. Therefore, individual board members no longer had the discretion to make these decisions on their own. There could even be competition among company leaders who were alumni from different institutions which had the same industry background because they wanted to direct donations to the university from which they had graduated, according to two interviewees from universities with a strong industry background.

Some challenges that interviewees pointed out might only be applicable to a particular institution, but a glimpse of these situations may still illuminate the complexity of their concerns. One interviewee talked about the detrimental effect of asking for donations from board members or their companies without providing services or bringing benefits to them first. It would cause embarrassment to those board members who were not yet ready to donate, and this would hurt feelings in the long run. Whether they would make donations and, if so, how much pressure could be put on board members, was an issue commented on by one interviewee. Therefore, he said, in his university, who had donated and the value of the donation would be kept confidential to avoid competitive donations through comparison. Members appreciated and welcomed this new approach, he added. For another institution, competitive pressure seemed to come from other institutions. An interviewee from a provincial university said that they did not disclose names of board members except for some really high-profile government officials or businesses because they were afraid that other institutions might go after their board members and ask for donations to their own institutions. Another interviewee commented that sometimes an individual or corporate member did not participate in board events nor even connect with the university after they had made an initial donation when becoming a member. His office would
then find it embarrassing to remind these members of their obligations as board members because the university had already received their donations.

A few interviewees commented that charity laws and tax policies as well as traditional Chinese culture were not conducive to encouraging donations. There were not many tax incentives that would encourage enterprises or individuals to donate. The culture of donating to an educational institution was not as well nurtured as in Western society, where there are well-articulated rules on the supervision of a charity. A lack of transparency and oversight in terms of how the donated money was handled by the receiving institution also discouraged donors, even though a board could have a special foundation committee to oversee the use of donated funds from members. One interviewee referred to the fact that senior university leaders sometimes treated the funds as if they were the university’s private coffer and there was not much consultation or disclosure about where the funds went.

More and more universities set up their own educational foundations as allegedly independent legal entities, receiving donations from various sources. These foundations are required by law to have a council to oversee their operations. The council has become a competitor of the university board, said one interviewee from an MOE-affiliated university. Because the government would provide 1:1 match funding to donations that the foundation received from other sources, university leaders were more interested in directing donations to the educational foundation than to the board foundation. Some board members were also more interested in becoming a council member of the foundation than being a board member because the foundation is a registered independent legal entity. Therefore, the appeal of the board seems to have been dwindling. Responsible for both board matters and foundation matters, one interviewee said the university was diverting more attention to the foundation such that most of his work revolved around matters related to the foundation rather than to the board. The university’s connection with its board members had been somehow broken. Board meetings were supposed to be convened annually, but the university had not convened a meeting for years. The interviewee felt that it was unlikely that there would be such a meeting in the foreseeable future.
6.4  Role 4 of the board

6.4.1  The board as an advisory body

As was shown in the previous chapter, board charters invariably referred to the board as a source of advice and deliberation with regard to university development and policies. While the first three roles of the board were widely acknowledged, interviews with board secretariat staff revealed that, generally speaking, the board’s role as an advisory body was very limited and even non-existent in some universities, except for formalities such as listening to the president’s report at board meetings and participating in the discussions afterwards, if there were any. Most consultation took place between university leaders and individual board members, usually about a specific issue as it arose and if it was believed to be in a member’s particular area of expertise.

If the board was playing any advisory role at all in this regard, that role mainly involved consultations about program or curriculum adjustments, where the university wanted board members’ input in order to better prepare students for the labor market. Since most board members were from industry and thus knew what qualities they were expecting from employees, the university could seek advice from board members regarding the institution’s talent training scheme and plans, according to ten interviewees. Four of them believed that input from board members was very helpful: graduates’ employability was improved, and the institution, students, corporate members and other employers were all happy. According to one interviewee from a national university that had strong industry ties, his university had just begun to be more open and more serious about the board’s advisory function regarding its new talent training scheme. They wanted to make the consultation procedures more formal to show their sincerity and respect for board members. They prepared the draft plan documents very carefully; they also worked out the meeting agendas carefully in a way that could facilitate as many consultation sessions as possible; and they sent the draft documents and the meeting agendas to board members well ahead of the scheduled annual board meeting. This was a new practice. The result was very exciting. Board members were very engaged and the university received many good suggestions and advice. The university therefore decided to carry out this practice more often when dealing with academic matters, said the interviewee. He and another interviewee observed that a bonus effect of effective consultation was that board members would feel that they were valued and their input mattered, which greatly motivated them to engage more. Another
interviewee was from a university which had close ties with the auto industry. He said although his university was not paying much attention to the board’s advisory function at present, the university was considering inviting board members’ input on talent training because the needs and strategic direction of the industry was what the university should follow and accommodate.

Another area where board members might be consulted was related to the institution’s overall development plan or important strategic decisions. For example, three interviewees mentioned that the draft of their university’s 12th five-year plan was distributed to board members for comments. Some board members were honest and pointed out what they thought could be issues with the plan, which had rarely happened before, reported one interviewee. Another interviewee said their board members were very cooperative when asked to give feedback on the university’s draft charter. The consultation process began about three months before their scheduled annual board meeting, so that the university could report the consultation results to board members right at the meeting. In another institution which received considerable support from overseas Chinese, board members did not focus on the daily operation of the university; rather, they were consulted before important decisions were to be made about the university. The senior administration had traditionally been very respectful of these board members and was very willing to seek advice from them regarding big issues or important decisions. Another institution also had a considerable overseas Chinese presence on its board which, according to the interviewee, had some degree of decision-making power (probably the only such board in this study). The board members were very active and brought to the institution many new ideas and concepts.

Overall, however, there seems to have been skepticism among interviewees regarding the advisory role of their board. They used phrases such as “not much” (buduo in Chinese), “not good” (buhao in Chinese), and “not effective” (xiaoguo bujia in Chinese) when describing how the board’s advisory role played out in their universities. One interviewee noted that the board of his university did not fulfill its advisory role as was required by the board charter. Three interviewees said that in terms of important decisions for the university, the university did not have an obligation to ask for advice from board members, nor did it have an obligation to follow their advice. Even for the previously mentioned four institutions whose boards seemed to have played a satisfactory role advising the university on its talent training plans, these interviewees agreed that their boards played a very limited role or no role at all in other matters.
6.4.2 Challenges associated with advising

Twelve interviewees expressed their concerns over this underplayed role of the board. These concerns can be summarized into two categories. The first category was concerned with the effectiveness of using the board as an advisory body. This is related to the ineffective medium of consultation, board members’ lack of interest in being consulted, their lack of understanding and lack of expertise regarding the issues to be discussed, and also the abstractness of their suggestions. For example, during a university’s half-day board meeting, there was usually a discussion session on the agenda, but after greeting remarks, speeches from university leaders and board members, ceremonies and photo-taking, there was just not enough time left for meaningful discussions on issues and problems. At two other institutions, suggestions from board members were usually too general to be useful and therefore could not become binding resolutions or be implemented. According to another secretariat staff member, board members were usually efficiency- and interest-oriented. They probably did not have the time to pay attention to or participate in the development of the university, nor did they know the university well. They might only be qualified to give some advice on curriculum or research directions from their own industry’s perspective.

The second category of concerns was related to a lack of mechanisms for consultation. As some interviewees mentioned earlier, the universities did not have an obligation to consult their boards. One secretariat staff said a platform for consultation simply did not exist and there were no “guidelines” (zhidao in Chinese) or “rules” (guize in Chinese) to follow. One interviewee attributed the board’s unsatisfactory advisory function to a “loose” (songsan in Chinese) relationship between the university and board members; another interviewee thought it was due to a lack of positioning for the board from above (i.e., from the state). Two other institutions reportedly had tried to enhance the board’s advisory role, but only found that it was not realistic to expect that to happen because other businesses of the board, such as collaboration, were more important and more likely to bear fruit. Staff from one of them commented that, compared with Western countries where consultation was a common practice, perhaps in China there was not a culture for it yet. Despite these pessimistic sentiments about the board in this regard, four interviewees expressed the need for their board to play a bigger role in advising the university, and two of them even reported that their universities were searching for a better approach to address this issue.
6.5 **Operation of the board**

So far, this chapter has presented various roles of the board of trustees as they surfaced in interviews with secretariat staff. These roles revolved around the relationship between the university, the board and board members, and to a lesser extent, the board’s relationship with the government. In order to look at the main research question from a different perspective, interviewees were also asked questions related to the operational aspects of their boards. Their responses indeed reflected the role of the board in terms of board meetings, board membership, communication with board members, institutional positioning for the board, and issues surrounding board operations.

6.5.1 **Board meetings**

Interviewees were asked to describe briefly the organization of their board meetings. Their responses revealed that board meetings were an important occasion for the university to connect with board members; however, there were also concerns about the organization and effectiveness of such meetings. Board meetings in most institutions were held regularly in accordance with their charter. Yet eight institutions reported that they had not convened a board meeting for a few years, not fulfilling the requirements put forward in their board charter; one of them had never held a board meeting since the board was created in the early 2000s.

Most interviewees reported that meetings were held during their institution’s anniversary celebration which was used as a good opportunity to expand connections with other stakeholders such as government officials and alumni who would be invited to the celebration gala. The anniversary events would also be a venue for the university to present its image to society. Interviewees noted that it was a good time to make appeals for contributions to the university (especially donations from various sources) and to formally sign collaboration contracts. Efficiency was another consideration because board members did not have to set aside another time for a board meeting.

According to the interviewees, agendas for board meetings were essentially the same. The meeting agenda would include, depending on duration of the meeting, speeches and/or reports by senior administration (the president and/or the party secretary), speeches by current and new
board members, ceremonies (for giving donation to the institutions, issuing new board member certificates, and signing contracts between the university and board members), appreciation speeches by faculty or student representatives who received research support or financial aid from board members, discussion sessions, photo shoots, banquets, and so forth.

Interviewees also identified several key issues with organizing a board meeting. A big challenge was to find the right theme for the meeting, according to five interviewees. Two of them reported that if a theme was not well-chosen, attendees and especially board members would feel it was a waste of time coming to the meeting. If this feeling persisted, board meetings would lose their appeal, given that many board members were business people and wanted to see an efficient use of their time and wanted to benefit from attending the meeting. One institution reported that they did not convene the annual board meeting for the year of 2012 because they could not find an appropriate theme. According to one director from a comprehensive national university, unlike universities which have a special industry background and thus have board members mostly from the same industry, their board members came from diverse backgrounds and therefore it was very difficult for the institution to find common interests among board members so that they could be motivated to join the meeting.

Two universities, however, were able to improve the effectiveness of their meetings recently by choosing a good theme. According to them, the key was to have a theme which was central to the university’s development but which at the same time was closely tied to the interests of board members. Both institutions reported satisfactory board member engagement in board meetings for the past one or two years, one example being the talent training plan in Section 6.4.1.

Scheduling a board meeting was another big challenge. Interviewees generally reported big efforts in bringing together board members from various cities, provinces, and even from abroad. In an institution which received financial support from overseas Chinese and thus had many overseas board members, these members usually would require the exact date for the meeting well in advance. However, the institution also had to coordinate not only with board members who were government officials but also with other government officials whom the institution regarded as VIPs, but their schedules kept changing and could not be fixed until very late. As a result, by the time the exact date of the meeting was decided upon, many overseas board members were no longer available for that date. Scheduling of the meeting sometimes was
affected by the political environment as well. For example, two universities said they had to postpone their board meetings for 2012 because dates for the national congress of the CCP were not made public until six weeks before the scheduled time and the institutions did not want their board meetings to be in conflict with the timing of the CCP’s congress.

6.5.2 Board membership

In this study, both the questionnaire and the interviews touched upon board membership but with different foci. In the previous chapter on questionnaire data, there were descriptions about board composition and selection criteria for board members. Though the sizes of the boards varied considerably among institutions, boards were not very different in terms of their constituent groups, namely a small number of internal members (the party secretary and/or president and senior administrators or professors) and a large number of external members composed of independent individuals and ex officio members representing government departments and businesses. With regards to member selection, both board charters and questionnaire responses provided similar selection guidelines and processes. In the interviews, however, the intention was to get to know some details about member selection and its impact in an attempt to understand the role of the board.

Only a small number of interviewees were willing to disclose some information about member selection that was based on financial contribution. For four boards, individual or corporate board members were expected to contribute an annual membership fee. Three interviewees also confirmed that members should donate a certain amount of money to be considered for board membership and in two cases the value of their donation would determine their status on the board, such as a regular member or a member among vice chairs. There were also five boards that did not require membership fees or donations as a pre-requisite for membership.

Another selection criterion was a member’s administrative rank or the size and status of a corporate member. Understandably, institutions looked for the highest possible ranks, and that created problems. For example, four interviewees commented that high-ranking members were not easily accessible for communication or meetings. It would also be difficult for them to spare time and energy to fulfill their responsibilities as board members. One interviewee in particular, who was from a provincial university that had hundreds of board members, mentioned that their
office was constantly given the task of approaching potential member candidates and persuading them to join the board. Due to the relatively low status of his office in comparison with high-ranking people, it was very difficult for his office to approach them. He also pointed out that new recruitments were mainly made for fundraising purposes. Because rarely were any members removed from the board, its member list just kept growing longer and longer.

As was mentioned earlier, corporate members are a big component of boards, although one institution expressed its dilemma as to whether to choose an individual or a company to be on its board. Its concern was not unfounded. For example, four other universities reported that they were not able to maintain the stability of their board due to frequent personnel turnover in governments and corporate members, which was out of their control. Personnel changes depended on whom the company wanted to send. This would cause communication problems as well. By contrast, three other institutions reportedly had few communication issues with their corporate members. They all found it practical and efficient for both the institution and corporate members to designate one department each to be in charge of communication.

6.5.3 Institutional positioning of the board

Interviews with secretariat staff revealed that the role and operation of the board was closely related to the visions and attitudes of university leaders, especially the president and/or the party secretary. Seven interviewees who thought their boards were operating on a regular basis commented that this was owing to the fact that their “xiao lingdao” (meaning “university leaders”) paid attention to board-related work. In a provincial institution, both the president and the party secretary required that they be informed of any visit by representatives above a certain rank from corporate board members. The president himself would also write postcards to board members. In an institution with overseas ties, the president and the party secretary were in charge of the board and the Foreign Affairs Office respectively, enabling the top leaders to understand the latest situation regarding the board and its members. By contrast, university leaders in seven other institutions were reportedly not putting due efforts into board-related work, which resulted in problems such as understaffing, inadequate financial resources, less participation, and a lack of commitment to cultivating relations with board members; consequently, neither the board nor the board members were active. Interviewees from another two institutions with overseas ties mentioned that attention and support from the provincial and municipal governments was an
important factor for their boards’ operation. Government officials usually would meet with influential board members who came to visit the city and the institution. These were high-profile meetings, broadcast in local news, which could be regarded as showing respect and appreciation for the board members’ contribution and also powerful publicity for the members.

The institutional positioning of the board, that is, the attitudes of university leaders towards the board and the values they attached to the board, influenced how the board operated and what role the board played. There seemed, however, to be two major challenges for the role of the board to be rolled out. The first challenge was how to ensure that the institutional vision for the board, such as those expected roles of the board as prescribed in the charter, be translated into practice. Lack of an operational mechanism within the university—for example, consistent strategic directions and support for board work, realistic mechanisms for coordination and collaboration among institutional units, and clearly articulated rules and regulations regarding how board members should fulfill their obligations and obtain benefits—had a very negative impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of board operations, to summarize comments from nine interviewees. They gave various examples to illustrate this point. For example, visions of university leaders very often conflicted with those of their predecessors, resulting in the constant, sudden reorientation of board-related work, including board member selection criteria and processes. There was not a systematic, streamlined process for communication with board members or with other divisions within the institution. There were few clear policies regarding the operation of the board. Consequently, the role and importance of the board was subject to the individual inclinations of university leaders; the operation of the board depended on the “liangxin” (meaning “conscience”, as quoted from two interviewees) of secretariat staff, and ties with board members became a “yici xiaofei” (meaning “one-time transaction”, a quote from one interviewee) with no impetus for further connections.

The second challenge relates to the specific context in China where the institutional positioning of a board and its role is conditioned by the policy environment. Seventeen interviewees attributed the problems with their boards in some way to the lack of policy support from the government. The government would not articulate the role of the board or how the board could operate within the current governance structure of public universities, which is the presidential-responsibility system under the supervision of the institution’s party committee. Consequently, institutional leaders were not able or not willing to change the board’s status quo, not even when
the board was not functioning well. Five of the interviewees would welcome a guideline from the government so that the institution could know in which direction to steer its board. According to them, their institutions did not want to be too aggressive in advancing the role of the board (i.e., expanding what the board was currently engaged in) in case things might get out of control or come into conflict with the current governance framework.

Regarding the role of the board, the general sense among interviewees was that the board was, at its best, a complementary unit helping the institution achieve its core mission. Three universities were reportedly aiming to bring the board closer to the core mission of their universities which, according to the interviewees, was talent training. They wanted to take advantage of board members’ expertise in industry to optimize curriculum and improve graduate employability. For some other universities, the board seemed to be mere decoration without much added value. Four interviewees perceived their board as “huaping” or “dianzhui” (both meaning “a decoration” or “something good to look at”). Another two interviewees used the phrase “jinshang tianhua” (meaning “icing on the cake”) to mean that it was good for the university to have something extra that might bring it some benefit. For yet a few other universities, the board was “keyou kewu” (meaning “something dispensable”), and at its worst, a “jilei” (literally translated as “chicken ribs”, meaning something perhaps having some value so that it would be regrettable to throw it away but at the same time not worthwhile keeping because that would take a lot of effort), according to two interviewees. Perhaps the varied metaphors for the board given by these interviewees provided a good summary of the role of board in Chinese public universities as they experienced it.

6.6 Other findings

There are some other findings which did not seem to fit neatly with the afore-mentioned coded themes, but which, when put together, revealed some realities in terms of the role and operation of the board. In response to questions about what benefits the institution and board members could bring to each other, a staff member from a national university immediately reported, “What was done cannot be made known and what is written in black-and-white cannot be done. You know what I mean.” She did not explain what she meant by that and continued to report the benefits, most of which were included in the coded themes. However, obviously there was some
shadiness around the university–board relationship that was handled secretively. This is where more transparency should be provided in terms of board operation. In another interview with a staff member from a provincial university in Guangdong, the interviewee commented that his university had become increasingly alert to the practice of using a candidate’s capacity to donate as the main criteria for recruiting members. He said there had been a few cases he knew of in other universities in which their members were charged with criminal offenses and that tarnished the institutions’ reputation because there was wide publicity at the time when those members were recruited. If the first interview cited here revealed some fuzziness in handling board matters, the second interview spoke to fuzziness in member selection. Fuzziness appeared to be actually a fairly common concern among interviewees, who were at the forefront of dealing with board matters. It was causing some negative impacts on the sustainability of the boards.

A third finding, which may not be closely related the role of the board but nonetheless showed the current development of boards in Chinese public universities, was related to communication among board secretariat staff themselves. Interviewees were asked whether they had had communication with board secretariat staff from other institutions regarding board work, such as exchange of ideas or visits with each other. A majority of them reported very little communication. Only five interviewees mentioned there was a fair amount of communication but two of them felt this communication or exchange was not substantially useful. One of them felt the boards he knew of were more or less the same; there were very few new things to learn from each other. A few universities which specialized in the same industry had some exchange opportunities when they attended meetings with industry. When asked what they wanted to learn most from others, interviewees were most interested in two things. First, they wanted to know other boards’ composition, member selection criteria and processes, how to maintain effective communication with members, and incentives for members’ participation. The second category of things included how to provide better service to board members, how to better use the expertise of board members or their resources, and what were useful strategies when things went wrong. Two interviewees commented that although their board was established more than fifteen years ago, they did not really feel that the university–board relationship was making much progress. These comments from interviewees seem to suggest that board development in China is still at an early stage, and many institutions are still searching for an operational model suitable for their boards.
In addition to interviewing board secretariat staff, the researcher had the opportunity to interview two academics who were committee members for drafting the *National Guidelines 2010–2020*. The objective was to understand why the board of trustees was mentioned in the policy document. The two academics reported that the drafting committee generally regarded the board of trustees as the future governance framework for higher education institutions and that it needed to be institutionalized through policy documents. However, this framework could lead to a huge conflict with the current governance system and therefore it could not be institutionalized at present. In addition, the government did not have any mature and concrete ideas as to how to approach the concept of the board of trustees and implement it. That was why the *National Guidelines* alluded to the board of trustees very briefly without giving any further elaboration. The two academics pointed out that the term “board of trustees” in the *National Guidelines* actually referred to Western practices, especially the American type of governing boards, which were different from the current boards in China which are mainly set up for the purpose of collaboration, research, and service. The Ministry of Education had also delegated research projects to a few universities to study the board and its application in China’s higher education institutions.

### 6.7 Understanding the role of the Chinese public board

Regarding the role of the board, responses from interviewees revealed many dimensions, most of which revolved around four themes: it is a platform for university–industry collaboration, a conduit to serve board members, a source of funding, and an advisory body. This section places these four roles in a broader context and analyzes them from a conceptual perspective.

It appears that the first three roles for the board are interest-based and emphasize mutual benefits for both the university and its board members. Through university–industry collaboration, both the university and the board members can get what they need. For example, collaborative internship programs improve the quality of teaching and students’ employability upon graduation while providing members with the technology and human resources that they need. The second role, a conduit to serve board members, seems to be focused on the board members who are obviously the benefit recipients, instead of being a two-way exchange of benefits. However, as some interviewees indicated, the result of providing service to board members can also bring
returns on investment because they will very often think of repaying the university in some way after they have been “served”. Regarding the third role, financial contributions from board members benefit the university; at the same time, their contribution can bring them membership status, better reputations, or favourable tax reductions. Therefore, actually both the university and the board members can receive benefits.

The driver behind these three roles of the Chinese public board is economic gains. In Amaral and Magalhães’s (2002) terms, members of the board (mainly external members) belong to the Form 1 category. Their relationship with the university is bound by market demands. When there is a good match in terms of economic gains between the university and board members, the two can be “happily married”, but when their capacity to bring economic gains is not comparable, in other words, when one party is not able to provide what the other party needs, their relationship can be jeopardized. Many of the cited challenges associated with fulfilling these three roles of boards have shown this. For example, some provincial universities did not have the needed capacity to attract board members; the removal of preferential treatment in admissions reduced the appeal of being a board member; a lack of subsequent financial contributions to the university following a member’s initial donation could mean losing membership; and board members were not interested in attending a board meeting if it did not have a theme relevant to them. In this regard, the exchange of economic benefits is the keystone for the university–board (and board members) relationship.

Embedded in a stakeholder society (Neave, 2002), interests affect relationships. Economic interests can be very powerful in determining relationships. According to Weber (as cited in Swedberg, 2003), when a group of people behave in an instrumental manner based on their individual interests, they can strike a more stable relationship with one another than when being forced to have a relationship prescribed by norms or authorities. In the case of Chinese boards, economic interests hold the university and the board members together, and this bond is likely to show cracks if economic gains cannot be achieved by both sides. As for public universities, economic gains from an instrumental relationship with boards support the institutions’ provision of education and provide qualified personnel to society. This is also a way for universities to fulfill their social obligations. Through the board of trustees, institutions gather stakeholders together and tap each other’s resources, provided that each and every one of them has something
to offer that can meet the others’ needs. This is a fundamental, and even perhaps the simplest, relationship between the university and the board.

The ways in which universities cultivated the university–board relationship, especially with regard to providing service to board members, reflect a particular aspect of Chinese culture, in terms of how the Chinese people and organizations develop individual and corporate relationships. Interviewees frequently referred to preferential treatments, such as having banquets with board members or paying holiday visits and giving gifts (for example, local products) to them. In M. M. Yang’s (1994) words, this kind of relationship, or guanxi in Chinese, is implicitly based on mutual interest and benefits. “Once guanxi is established between two people”, she observed, “each can ask for a favor of the other with the expectation that the debt incurred will be repaid sometime in the future” (p. I). An expectation of repayment actions from board members could also be detected among interviewees when they commented on the benefits of providing service to members.

Some of the challenges associated with boards could be a result of this favor exchange. For example, a one-time donation by new board members would make universities less aggressive in requesting these members to be further involved or make further contributions to the university. The lack of exit protocols for board membership could also be partially attributed to this exchange of favors and benefits. Overreliance on this relationship could even lead to breaching rules and regulations, at the cost of the public good, an argument that L. Li (2011) upheld.

Presumably, things can be very different when economic gains are not to be pursued in a relationship; instead, one party is supposed to behave in a way that largely brings benefits (economic or non-economic) to the other party or even for the public good. This is what Amaral and Magalhães (2002) called the function of the Form 2 category of external stakeholders. The determining factor in these relationships is, therefore, no longer the market; it is now the public good. This “altruism” on the part of the external stakeholders may require more than what can easily be expected from a relationship based on economic interests. The difficulty in finding common interests among board members for convening a board meeting, as in the case of a comprehensive university cited earlier, reflected the damaging effects of overlooking the board’s mission to serve the university and the public good. This is where the fourth role of the Chinese public board—an advisory role—should come into play. It needs a more supportive environment.
First of all, board members must be given legitimacy for advising. Board charters collected from these universities and the interviews with secretariat staff seem to suggest that this was the case. However, the one-party state is the main provider of public education. It exercises control of public institutions through systems (e.g., policy directives, personnel appointment, financing) and institutional arrangements (e.g., the presidential-responsibility framework under the leadership of the CCP). Traditionally, these arrangements have not permitted a space for others to participate in governance; in particular, there is not a public space for possible authority in parallel with that of the state. In this absence of a civil society, advising, especially oversight, from those that are not in the system is virtually impossible. Politically, there is no mechanism in place that would support a deliberative and monitoring board. This is perhaps why none of the interviewees ever mentioned a monitoring role for the board, an expected role that appeared in nine charters collected from these institutions. In a few universities that had strong ties with overseas Chinese, the advisory role of the board seemed to have had some impact on the institution. The possible advising that took place in some other universities was mostly about talent training, and this was perhaps largely due to the drive for mutual benefit.

The second environmental factor conducive for boards to play an advisory role is an appropriate mechanism for that to happen. In the Chinese case, this second element is largely missing. That is perhaps why some interviewees reported that their university did not have the obligation to seek advice from board members, or their universities did not have the culture for it, or the universities did not know how to consult effectively, or they were not willing to take risks or go too far.

These boards were obviously not decision-making bodies, but in the overall governance structure of Chinese public universities, the board has become an internal organizational unit for many institutions and allegedly assumes an advisory role in institutional governance arrangements. It

21 Each board’s involvement in this function had its special situation. As was mentioned in Section 6.3.1, five out of seven of these universities in this study were created out of generous financial support from overseas Chinese, who became board members of these institutions. It may not be an exaggeration to say that these people were the breadwinners of the institutions. Therefore, their opinions mattered and they even made decisions on important issues. These universities had the tradition of respecting their board members, whose advice was crucial to their creation and development. Also, two interviewees noted that because these members were mostly educated in foreign and even developed countries, they had the culture and mindset for getting involved.
has implications for institutional governance, and the four roles of public boards also show evidence of adaptive governance. First of all, the re-introduction of a board of trustees to the public system was already an adaptive attempt. Learning from the West is one of the features of adaptive governance (Heilmann & Perry, 2011a). Second, Chinese universities creatively adapted the American board to the Chinese context within the parameters of government limits. The mission and function of the Chinese public board is quite different from that of governing boards in the U.S. For example, the Chinese board explicitly emphasizes bringing benefits to board members. Another striking difference is that the American governing board is charged with fiduciary and legal responsibilities, while the Chinese board is not a decision-making body. The American board is advised to respect academic freedom as the AGB (2010c) principles have indicated, whereas the Chinese board members are encouraged to be involved in curriculum and other academic matters, which, according to interviewees, could better prepare students for future job markets.

If the practice of adopting and adapting the Western idea of the board to the Chinese context is nothing new to the field of education, then what makes this borrowing unique is that this adaptation had the most practical consideration—economic interest—which perhaps represents the easiest and the most effective way to make use of external stakeholders. This adaptation was not meant to, and should not, threaten the existing political order.

The adaptive governance of the CCP’s style can also be seen in the operation of the boards. Their charters conveyed vague positioning of the board, and interviews with secretariat staff confirmed this vagueness. For example, there was no clear government policy that would show the government’s attitude towards this organizational structure; the positioning of the board depended on the vision of the individual university leaders; board composition was not clearly defined and there were few guidelines to follow in terms of recruiting and stopping membership; and there was the secretiveness in operation that promoted one interviewee to say “What was done cannot be made known and what is written in black-and-white cannot be done.” All these practices, to a great extent, allowed flexibility so universities could react according to their specific situation.
6.8 Summary

Interviews with board secretariat staff showed that collaboration seems to be the biggest role that a board plays. In this respect, university and industry collaboration can have a major impact on the institutions’ core mission, such as teaching, research, technology transfer, and contribution to the local economic and social development. Both the university and the industry, as represented by board members and their businesses, benefit from this collaboration. Fundraising is still an important role, but universities are now beginning to emphasize their service to the board and the society as a way to attract board members (and their donations). The advisory role of the board is very limited, and if there is any such role, it is mainly confined to curriculum design that could improve students’ employability after graduation.

The relationship between institutions and board members is ostensibly interest-oriented, as is shown by the quote from an interviewee that passion and relationships need to be substantiated by real liyi (meaning “interest” or “benefit”). This bond between the institution and its board, especially the cultivation of liyi for board members, is very different from the assumptions for board members in American public institutions, which call for non-partisan decision-making (Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, n.d.). A possible dominance of liyi in the institution–board relationship resembles the two sides of a business transaction; the board members (who are mostly external members in the Chinese case, see Table 5.3 of Chapter 5) become the Form 1 external stakeholders in Amaral and Magalhães’s (2002) categorization. By comparison, the role of Form 2 external stakeholders is less obvious in the Chinese case, due to the absence of or a less developed civil society that could provide some parallel authority to that of the state.

Many challenges associated with board function and operation can be attributed to unclear or inconsistent positioning of the board by institutional leaders, the absence of an operational mechanism, or even a lack of policy from above guiding the development and operation of these boards. Still other challenges can arise due to ambiguous rules and regulations (if there are rules and regulations at all) regarding member selection criteria and processes, members’ rights and obligations, coordination and implementation procedures. To some extent, these problems seemed to be the price to pay when adapting and experimenting with new ideas. On the other
hand, the Chinese culture of favor exchange also led to some informal practices and had some negative impacts on the role of the board.

No matter how many useful roles it can play and how many challenges it brings, the Chinese public board is a reality, bearing the terminology of the American governing board and apparently going its own way. Just after the researcher had completed her data collection in December 2012, at least two new boards were created. This trend may continue, now that various recent policy documents (see Section 2.3.3 of Chapter 2) have indicated that the board topic is on the government’s agenda. Insight from the two academics who were involved in drafting the National Guidelines reflects the dilemma on the part of the government as to whether the board should be a key decision-making body and if so what authority should be delegated to the board, as well as how to reconcile its potential conflict with the current governance framework which emphasizes the party’s authority in decision-making processes. A brief reference to the board of trustees in the National Guidelines postpones the tough work of defining the board; it may bypass the seemingly contradictory governance arrangements to allow for exploration and experimentation, so that there is flexibility for future interpretation of the concept. Perhaps, in this way, the idea of the board of trustees will not die, but the price for being ambiguous is also impressive, considering the dysfunction or confusion around the board in these universities.
Chapter 7
Discussion and Conclusion

The board of trustees has been an organizational unit in a number of public institutions since 1978, and yet none of the national policy documents had ever explicitly referred to this unit in the public sector until 2010 when the National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development 2010–2020 was issued. Even in this document, there was no elaboration on what the board would be like, except that establishing a board of trustees was encouraged and that long-term mechanisms for social support and oversight of institutions should be improved. This reference to the board was under the sub-section of expanding collaboration with society. Presumably, the board of trustees could become an important addition to the current governance structure in public institutions. Given that there had been very little research on the public board, the researcher proposed this study on the role of the board, with the aim to understand its functions and its relationships with institutions and thus provide empirical evidence for further improvement in board performance.

Since data collection was completed for this study near the end of 2012, many events have taken place that will have a tremendous impact on institutional governance arrangements. Between November 2013 and September 2014, the government and the Ministry of Education approved 32 university charters and issued a series of regulations on the academic board, the board of trustees, and the dual governance framework (i.e., the president vis-à-vis the university party committee or party secretary). This study, therefore, serves as a summative and formative piece of research on the board of trustees before these new regulations were put in place.

This chapter summarizes this research project and discusses the research findings and their implications. It first reviews the main research question and sub-questions, followed by a review of the research design. It then responds to the research questions and summarizes the findings. The third section discusses the research findings by drawing upon the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3, examining the role of the board under the microscope of broader social and political governance arrangements in contemporary China. The chapter concludes with the researcher’s reflections on this study.
7.1 An exploratory journey into the unknown: Reviewing the research design

This study investigated the main research question, “What is the role of the board of trustees in Chinese public universities,” through five sub-questions:

- Which universities have created a board and in what contexts?
- How does the board contribute to the work of the university?
- What benefits do board members obtain from their participation?
- What are the challenges associated with operating a board?
- What is the relationship between the board and the university, as well as its stakeholders such as the state and society?

A review of the literature revealed that the public board of trustees in China has its roots in the Republican era, during which the American board of trustees was viewed by many as an influential and effective governance model. The creation, development, removal, and re-introduction of boards in China’s public higher education system were closely related to the political control of higher education as well as to the social and educational demands from society. Therefore, based on a prototype of the American board of trustees, the construction of the five sub-questions was informed by a governance model of Chinese public institutions that incorporated theories and concepts from three distinctive dimensions: the political science theory of adaptive governance, the sociological theory of civil society in communist-party states, and the concept of the emerging stakeholder society in the higher education sector. The study assumed that these three dimensions, acting alone and in combination with one another, all impacted the role of the board in various ways that could be explored through the sub-questions, in terms of board composition, operation, and its relationships with the institution.

The study began by determining which public institutions had created a board. Hence, the distribution of boards nationwide was mapped out by systematically searching for information on institutional websites and through telephone inquiries. This information was also used to develop a sample of research participants. A qualitative approach to data collection was adopted including (a) document analysis of board charters, institutional and news reports, and policy documents; (b) a survey of board secretariats; and (c) interviews with board secretariat staff.
Research findings were grouped into thematic clusters, presented and analyzed in Chapters 5 and 6. The following section of this chapter revisits the research questions and responds to the individual questions in sequence.

7.2 The role of the board in Chinese public universities: Revisiting the research questions

7.2.1 In response to the sub-questions

A foundational sub-question for this study was to find out which universities had created a board and in what context. This study reveals that the board of trustees is not a common organizational structure among public institutions; only 11% of public universities had created a board. In terms of regional distribution, public boards were concentrated in eastern China and a few central and western regions where the economy is more developed. Institutions that were affiliated with the Ministry of Education and other line ministries or central government units, because of their advantaged access to resources, were more likely than provincial universities to have created a board. The fact that board membership was mostly dominated by representatives from industry, followed by government officials, reflects universities’ desire to connect with business and enterprises as well as their use of government connections to influence policy and support. The boards were generally large, with an average of 100 members. Provincial institutions tended to have larger boards, which intensified the competition for getting local board members.

In terms of the context in which boards were created, the most cited rationales provided in board charters were introducing social actors as complementary forces to government in the provision of education, strengthening ties with the broader society, and bringing mutual benefits to both members and institutions. At the micro (or institutional) level, these drivers for creating a board revealed that institutions depended on external support and emphasized the exchange of benefits to attract support. At the macro (or policy) level, the creation of boards in public institutions over the last 30 years has been closely associated with decentralization, especially diversification of funding sources, and marketization in higher education. The different phases of board development from 1978 to 2011 illustrate that surges in board creation have been incidentally
correlated with, or perhaps even caused by, concurrent decentralization policies, although their influence on different types of institutions may vary.

The main research question about the role of the board was partially answered by the second sub-question which looked at the contributions that boards have made to their universities. Both board charters and interview data suggested that public boards were an important conduit for institutions to carry out their teaching, research, and service mission. Board members could advise on curriculum, be involved in teaching and supervising students, and provide co-op and internship opportunities to students. They also played a big role in employing university graduates and thus helping ease the pressure for graduate employment. With regard to their contribution to research, institutions had a better chance of winning funding competitions if their applications were augmented by members’ participation as co-investigators. Contract research from board members not only brought research dollars to institutions but also raised their research profiles. The contribution of the board also included supporting the university’s training and continuing education programs, which provided educational opportunities to people in the broader society. Through the connections and expertise of board members in various fields, universities had a better sense of labor market needs and could better serve the social and economic development of the region.

A salient contribution of boards was their support for an institution’s fundraising efforts, either through board members themselves as donors or mobilizing other sources. Actually, many of the collaborative activities between institutions and their board members that were mentioned earlier in this section can be understood as the members’ contributions to university revenue, diversifying and expanding their funding base.

It is not reasonable to assume that the boards of all the universities included in this study would bring these benefits to their universities to the same degree. Some boards may have done a better job in certain areas than others, such as in the case of a number of institutions where consultation with board members on development plans was fruitful. The role of some boards may have been mainly limited to fundraising. Some other boards did not appear to be playing any significant role at all in that they had not met for years.

While the second sub-question focuses on the benefits that institutions obtain from board members, the third sub-question asks how board members benefit from their membership. As
was shown in the charters and interviews, member benefits were explicitly encouraged and regarded by many institutions as a service to members. Some universities realized that they could not just wait to be served; instead, they needed to take the initiative to serve members first. Apart from fulfilling the university’s service mission to the society, this service to individual board members or corporate members was believed to eventually win their hearts and minds so that they would consider making contributions to the university, through collaboration and donation. The study revealed that service and benefits to board members was mostly done through mobilizing institutional resources to meet members’ needs, for example, the training of employees, the use of university facilities, and even special accommodation of their private needs, such as taking degree or diploma programs, receiving medical treatment, and obtaining assistance with accommodation and transportation for visits to the university or the city. Some benefits extended to members’ families such as favorable consideration for their children’s admission into the university.

Contributions or mutual benefits clearly constitute a major role for the board, and yet it is not always easy to obtain these desirable win-win results. The fourth sub-question therefore investigates the challenges in the operation of boards and the issues facing institutions. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 elaborated on those challenges from an operational perspective. This section, however, discusses those challenges from a conceptual perspective, in an attempt to illuminate the causes of those challenges.

As was mentioned earlier, the main driver behind the relationship between the institution and its board members is the exchange of benefits. Here, whether an exchange of interests can materialize depends very much on whether both sides can provide something that the other side needs for the purpose of exchange. When there is an imbalance or mismatch between what the two sides can offer to each other, an exchange of interests is not likely to occur. For example, the research capacity of an institution would influence whether the university was able to assist corporate members with their research and development difficulties. As some interviewees indicated, universities were particularly concerned with their attractiveness to board members and so they offered them a wide range of privileges. Some provincial universities, in particular, had a hard time recruiting board members because of their lower status or limited capacity to meet members’ needs.
This exchange of benefits also tends to cause an unstable relationship between the institution and board members if the balance of exchange suddenly tilts. The example that two interviewees cited of the decreased engagement of board members as a result of setbacks in the railway industry reveals that a relationship based on benefit exchange is not always sustainable. If the university–board relationship had been built more on serving the public good than on the exchange of benefits, board members would have been more engaged with the university and would have actively looked for ways to solve the problem together when both sides were facing a difficult time. A relationship primarily based on the exchange of benefits tends to overlook the broader picture of serving the university for the public good. Such a relationship alone cannot sustain the continued interest and commitment of board members.

The second major issue underscoring the challenges faced by university boards was the ambiguity around the role of the board both at the system level and the institutional level. The government has not clearly articulated how it would frame the role of the board. Without clear direction from the top, institutions have had to make decisions that they deemed to be within the boundaries of the governance frameworks, leaving many uncertainties and inconsistencies in terms of board matters, for example, board composition and board member selection, or conducting backroom deals. Their handling of board matters was fluid by nature; there were no clear rules to follow, for example, when it comes to removing members from the board. They were not willing to take risks in terms of being more aggressive or innovative. The fact that many boards had not convened a meeting for years clearly illustrates this point. Ambiguity around the role of the board creates too much flexibility and uncertainty to uphold the sustainable development of the board.

The first four sub-questions examined the role of the board at the micro-level, focusing on the various ways in which the board can have an impact. The fifth sub-question, however, looks at the role of the board holistically from a wider perspective, asking “What is the relationship between the board, the university and other stakeholders such as the state and society?” The board–university relationship is clearly collaborative and based on mutual benefits. Relationships between the board, the state, and the society are more subtle and are embedded in an intangible web of power dynamics. Evidence from this study suggests that in the Chinese context, both in the Republican Era or under the Communist regime, the existence and the authority of the board reflects the relationship between the state and society, and its role is subject to push and pull
from each side. A review of the historical developments of boards shows a clear association between government control of the social space and the role of the board.

At its inception in 1920, the board of trustees was a governing body, assuming the same role as its counterparts in the U.S. The government at the time, the Peking government, largely followed a policy of “de facto non-interference in the internal workings of the organization” (Strauss, 1997, p. 341). National educational legislation also resolved to shift from government-controlled education to autonomous governance (Song, 2004). There was a decline in state authority as a result of fragmented warlord politics, as well as the arguably early emergence of a public space where the Chinese people, especially urban dwellers, could exercise some degree of self-legitimation (Bergère, 1997). Later on, the Nationalist government, which was essentially a single-party regime, took a more centralized approach towards higher education and passed a national law that removed the governing power from the board of trustees and assigned it an advisory role. The government also tightened its control of social organizations (Bergère, 1997).

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control in 1949, the party-state incorporated all political, economic, social, cultural, and intellectual spheres into the state apparatus. It maintained strong central control of higher education institutions. Virtually all boards of trustees (including the private ones) were removed from the entire system in 1952. It was only after 1978 when China started to adopt the economic reform and opening-up policy that boards of trustees were gradually reintroduced into public higher education institutions. More recent board developments have corresponded to decentralization and an emerging stakeholder society. However, under the party-state, the board has been delegated an advisory role at most.

Clearly, the historical evolution of boards indicates a strong correlation between the level of political, central control (i.e., less social space) and the removal or creation of boards in the higher education system. The Western idea of a board of trustees, as Worth (2008) commented on the American experience, is to provide a buffer to protect institutions from political interference and maintain academic freedom. In centralized monolithic regimes, this role of the board is perceived as challenging the authority of the center. Therefore, the board cannot be a key decision-making body. The original line of thought behind the National Guidelines 2010-2020, which was to move towards the establishment of a board of trustees with the same
governing authority as the American governing board, simply would not be realistic in China. (See the author’s conversation with two academic officials discussed in Section 6.6 of Chapter 6.)

Guided by the five sub-questions, the research findings of this study have shown that the role of the board of trustees in China’s public universities has unique features. The following section thus responds to the main research question: What is the role of the public board?

### 7.2.2 The main research question: The role of the board

So what exactly is the role of the board of trustees in public universities in China? The so-called board of trustees, except for its name, is not at all the same as the board of trustees (a governing body) in American universities. The Chinese universities inherited that name only but gave the board a different meaning and role. Rather, boards in Chinese public universities are somewhat similar to the American sounding boards (or advisory councils) used by university presidents or deans.

However, the Chinese boards are different from these American sounding boards in two aspects, if not in a fundamental way. First, judging from their mission statements, the American sounding boards envision largely a one-way relationship between board members and the institution, meaning the former serves the latter. In the Chinese case, however, it is a two-way relationship that is explicitly emphasized; that is, mutual benefits are expected from this relationship. This feature of universities being expected to serve members in various ways is not highlighted in the case of American sounding boards in Worth’s study (2008). Charters for the Chinese boards, on the other hand, look like business contracts and specify the rights and obligations on both sides, including privileges (even private ones) that members can enjoy. None of the charters even mention the scenario of conflict of interest; rather, it seems that interests are cultivated. This is understandable, given that board members are even encouraged to open businesses with their institutions. The board of trustees is endowed with roles that are fundamentally different from the American model from which it was derived, and it is a manifestation and result of the adaptive governance approach of the CCP.

As higher education institutions worldwide are increasingly aspiring to and compelled to integrate with regional economies (Sá, 2011), university–industry cooperation for mutual
benefits seems now to be the norm. A study by Ranga et al. (2013) provided a fairly comprehensive environmental scan of university–industry cooperation in the U.S. and Canada, in terms of the motivations, drivers, benefits, impacts, among other things. The authors found that the most important motivations for forging such a relationship were improving institutions’ research capacity, education offerings, and student employment. These were not much different from what the board secretariat staff had observed in this study. Regna et al. also identified a number of key forms of cooperation, many of which were actually what the Chinese university–board relationship had to offer, for example, providing student internships, offering consultation services or professional training programs, facilitating technology transfer, solving problems for industry, and consultation on curriculum. Interestingly, mismatch in research capacity constituted a barrier for university–industry collaboration for both the Chinese and North American institutions.

What does stand out as a major difference in university–industry relationships between the Chinese and North American practices is the extent to which advice from industry is valued and incorporated in governance. This is also the second feature that makes the Chinese boards different from the American sounding boards, that is, a much greater value is attached to the sounding boards for their advisory role. According to Worth’s (2008) study, presidents and deans highly valued their board as an advisory body. Presidents heavily valued advice on “broad policies and programs” (p. 20) and opposed too much involvement in curriculum matters which tended to compromise the academic freedom of faculty, except perhaps in cases of professional programs where external advice from the field was viewed as more legitimate. The inverse seems to be true for Chinese boards. Board members are encouraged to advise on curriculum and, according to board secretariat staff, their role of advising the university on broader issues is generally very limited, except for some institutions that have strong support from overseas Chinese. Board secretariat staff cannot speak on behalf of their presidents regarding how the universities handle the advisory role, but given their involvement in board matters they have a solid understanding of the ongoing work of the board.

The comparison between the boards of trustees in Chinese public universities with American sounding boards is not meant to suggest that one is superior to the other; it is meant to highlight the characteristics of the Chinese boards so that they can be understood on a deeper level. The two distinctive features of the Chinese boards clearly suggest that board members, especially
external board members (who constituted the large majority of board membership anyways), belong to the Form 1 category in Amaral and Magalhães’s (2002) analysis. Particularly, in a stakeholder society, the relationship between the institution and board members is primarily based on reciprocity, that is, the exchange of benefits and even economic benefits. It is advocated as a way for the university to extend societal linkages. It is also used to attract potential board members, serve current members, and sustain their attachment to the institution.

In the one-party state, the role and functions of the Chinese public board cannot be divorced from the governance model of the state. The author would argue that the role of the board, as well as the many challenges associated with it, is characteristic of the adaptive governance which the CCP leadership has been very adept at employing. The following sections look at this assertion in detail.

7.3 **A Chinese model of the board of trustees: Impact of adaptive governance**

Probably no one could deny that the party-state has demonstrated remarkable resilience since it initiated the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. This resilience has been attributed to the adaptive governance of the CCP that uses a guerrilla policy style to respond to changing circumstances (Heilmann & Perry, 2011a). The development of boards in China’s public universities also corresponds to the peculiar governance style of this party-state.

7.3.1 **Pursuing (economic) interests**

The use of benefits by educational institutions as a mechanism for maintaining relationships with board members is nothing new in China. It is worth noting that China’s reform started from the economic frontier, in pursuit of wealth and economic interests. The party-state made a strategic move to open up the market and gradually retreated from the planned economy, which was a big shift from the socialist centralized economy of the Soviet model. From 1978 to early 1989, the economic reform was cautiously managed; from 1989 to 1991 there was stagnation of economic reform due to the impact of the Tian’anmen incident in 1989; and then starting in 1992, the architect of China’s reform, Deng Xiaoping, kick-started a new round of harsher economic reforms (Naughton, 2012). Deng’s popular saying, “It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or
white as long as it catches mice”, best summarizes the spirit behind that reform. The government used the pursuit of economic interests as a stepping stone for change.

The development of boards also coincided with the two phases of economic reforms. Figure 5.2 of Chapter 5 illustrated the timeline for when the Chinese boards were created. Obviously, the first board appeared in the same year that the economic reform started in 1978. Over the next fifteen years, there was a slow but steady increase of newly created boards in Chinese universities. After the second round of economic reform was initiated, especially from 1994 onwards, the number of new boards increased dramatically. Granted, the policies at the time encouraged universities to strengthen ties with industry by setting up teaching-research-industry collaborative programs, but at a deeper level, it was the overall economic reform and the introduction of increased market forces that had triggered those policies. Embedded in a stakeholder society in an economic reform context, the pursuit of mutual benefits seems to be attractive if universities want to draw potential resources from the social forces that can support them.

The question is whether the use of economic benefits is sufficient to sustain a healthy, effective university–board relationship. It proved to be useful to spearhead university–industry collaboration at the initial developmental stages of boards, but obviously it has encountered greater challenges and even brought damages to the university–board relationship, as was evidenced in this study. If no other deeper and broader dimensions for this relationship are cultivated, boards in public universities are likely to maintain their status quo at best, which does not look very promising since some of the boards examined by this study had already become dysfunctional and the sentiments among interviewees regarding their boards seemed to be more concerned than cheerful, e.g., when they used the expression “chicken ribs” to describe their boards. In the worst case scenario, the development of boards could come to an impasse, entangled in a web of business competitions, institutional governance restraints, and loss of trust and credibility from the public. This is somewhat analogous to what has happened to China’s economic reform. It has brought unprecedented wealth to the country, but at the same time over-emphasis on economic development has also brought severe environmental, food security, and equity issues. Further reforms in other spheres of the society are needed to augment economic development (K. Yu, 2014).
Over-reliance on economic benefits tends to focus the board’s role on local aspects, such as technology transfer of a particular discovery to a particular business or consortium, or training programs for a particular corporate member. The broader, bigger picture of the development of the institution is thus obscured. The fact that universities have a hard time finding an attractive theme to convene board meetings demonstrates a necessity to orient the university–board relationship towards seeing the institution as the main beneficiary, rather than the other way around. Perhaps advisory boards at the faculty or departmental level could pay more attention to local issues. The board of trustees of the institution needs more motivation and capacity to deal with important issues that will impact the institution as a whole.

### 7.3.2 Progressing towards institutionalization

Heilmann and Perry (2011a) maintained that the policy style of the party-state is characterized by a “change-oriented ‘push-and-seize’ style that contrasts with the stability-oriented ‘anticipate-and regulate’ norm of modern constitutional government and rule-of-law polities” (p. 13). Their observation about the CCP’s governance style is also applicable to the CCP’s handling of the board of trustees.

From the creation of the first public board in 1978 until 2010, none of the policy documents openly referred to the concept of the board of trustees for regular, public higher education institutions, according to the author’s survey of documents. During this period, institutions were experimenting with what they deemed necessary and good for the institution without stepping forward too far as to threaten the current fundamental institutional governance framework, the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the party committee. This is indeed “groping for stones to cross the river”, another maxim from Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s reform and opening. Universities inherited the term ‘board of trustees’ but gave a different meaning to it so that it could serve their needs. The National Guidelines 2010-2020 alluded to the board of trustees for the first time, but the document merely made a brief reference to it, without any elaboration except to indicate the need for a long-term social oversight mechanism. Over time there were more references to the board of trustees in policy documents or official speeches. In the regulations for drafting university charters, institutions with a board were required to provide information on the role of the board, its composition, and procedural rules (Ministry of Education, 2011a). Nonetheless, there were still no clear policy guidelines on
how the government wanted to position the board and its role in institutional governance structure. This is perhaps why board secretariat staff (and university leaders) felt frustrated by a lack of clear policy guidelines that could help with their work, and they commented on their boards as “a decoration”, “icing on the cake”, or “chicken ribs” (see Section 6.5.3 of Chapter 6).

What is indeed intriguing about the adaptive governance approach of the party-state, though, is that it also allows for institutionalization when conditions are right. According to Heilmann and Perry (2011a), this is “regularizing governance” (p. 21). This style is also salient in educational policies on governance. Thirty-two universities had created a charter and obtained approval from the Ministry of Education by September 2014. Another classic example is the policy on academic councils. The idea of setting up an academic council in universities had been discussed in policy documents for decades, with no clear articulation of its composition or membership. Following a careful review of experiments that had taken place at different universities, in November 2013 the Ministry of Education issued a detailed regulation document on academic councils and effectively institutionalized this governance structure in policy.

A similar phenomenon is now taking place for the board of trustees. In July 2014, the Ministry of Education issued the Regulations for the Board of Trustees of Regular Higher Education Institutions (Provisional) which came into effect on September 1, 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014c). The document defined the board of trustees as an advisory, consultative, deliberative, and monitoring body. It is an important organizational unit and institutionalization platform for scientific decision-making, democratic oversight, and societal participation. The board is expected to help the institution to extend its service to the society and its connections and cooperation with the society, as well as receive support from the society. Institutions with a board should have a board charter, clearly define the role and function of the board in governance structures, enhance the representativeness and authority of the board, and improve their consultation and cooperation mechanisms with board members. The regulations also elaborated on the function and responsibilities of the board; it made recommendations on its size and composition, methods for member selection, terms of service, organizational structure and operation, information disclosure, and so forth.

The new regulations clarify and streamline arrangements in the following areas: (a) the regulations emphasize the board’s role in discussing and advising the university on its annual
budget and financial reports; (b) the regulations recommend that academic leaders, faculty, and students sit on the board; (c) the board can participate in evaluating the quality of the institution, and give recommendations and suggestions; (d) members should not get paid or receive other material benefits, nor should they utilize their positions to get improper benefits; and (e) the institution should make the board charter and member list publicly available and disclose relevant information on their board and its performance. By contrast, none of the 35 charters collected for this study mentioned that the board could advise and deliberate on the institutional budget and financial reports. At most, some charters said that the board could review the financial reports of the board foundation (donations from board members themselves or from other sources through their efforts) and make decisions on how to use the funds. The study found that there were no students or rank-and-file faculty currently sitting on the boards. Virtually no charters said that the board could be part of the evaluation mechanism for quality. Almost all charters gave members some kind of private benefits. Some interviewees also suggested that their members may receive private gifts. Regarding the disclosure of board information, more than half of the 84 institutions that were identified as having a board by this study did not post their board charters or membership on their website (see Table 5.7 of Chapter 5). Table 7.1 illustrates, in detail, the comparison between what this study found (especially in board charters) and what the new policy document requires of the board of trustees.

One salient point in the new regulation is that it clearly disallows making use of member status for private benefits. This should raise the alarm for institutions and board members that mutual benefits should be cultivated for the public good. Informal and even unlawful behind-closed-doors deals by way of favor exchange would have less ground to operate, especially since now the Chinese government has stepped up efforts to curb gift-giving and corruption (Wall Street Journal, 2014). Some of the strategies that the secretariat staff had reported for establishing rapport with board members may not work out under the new regulation. Universities and board members therefore should be brought onto the right track when it comes to cultivating university–board relationships. A more sustainable relationship is based on serving the interests of the institution as a whole.
Table 7.1 Comparing the Research Findings of This Study and the New Regulation Policy

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<td>Rationale</td>
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<td>▪ Carry out national policies;</td>
<td>▪ Build a modern university system with Chinese characteristics;</td>
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<td>▪ Invite other social forces as educational providers;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Promote ties with society and provide mutual benefit;</td>
<td>▪ Improve and regulating the board;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Improve capacity for quality education</td>
<td>▪ Promote university-society connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Advisory, consultative, deliberative, monitoring body</td>
<td>Advisory, consultative, deliberative, and monitoring body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>▪ Collaboration;</td>
<td>▪ Connection with and service to society;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Service to society;</td>
<td>▪ Collaboration;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Fundraising;</td>
<td>▪ Democratic decision-making;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Advising</td>
<td>▪ Support and participation from society;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Oversight and evaluation mechanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>▪ Mostly limited to senior administration, government, industry, alumni, scholars,</td>
<td>▪ Includes also academic administrators, rank-and-file faculty, and noted public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and noted public figures;</td>
<td>▪ Requires appropriate proportion for membership categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ No mention of proportion for membership categories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>4-5 years per term</td>
<td>5 years per term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of board</td>
<td>No mention of the size of the board</td>
<td>Includes at least 21 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of reference (board)</td>
<td>▪ No mention of consultation or deliberation of institutional budget and financial</td>
<td>▪ Involved in consultation and/or deliberation of institutional budget and financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reports;</td>
<td>reports;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ No mention of participating in evaluation of the university’s quality of education</td>
<td>▪ Participates in evaluating the quality of education of the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board meetings</td>
<td>Vary across institutions</td>
<td>Board meeting of all members convened at least once a year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting protocols</td>
<td>Few board charters specify protocols for board meetings or rules of procedures.</td>
<td>Requires board charters to specify protocols for board meetings and rules of procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finacing</td>
<td>No mention of the source of operating cost for the board</td>
<td>Requires institutions to provide operating cost for the board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure of information</td>
<td>Only 39% of the institutions posted their board charters and member list on their website.</td>
<td>Requires institutions to make board charters, list of members and other relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>information available to the public for public scrutiny.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The new regulations on boards also appear to accentuate the consultative and deliberative role of the board to improve institutional governance and address public accountability. The issue is: What is the underlying rationale for this role? If the fundamental drive for more participation from stakeholders is to legitimize the current dual governance arrangements, then the board is likely to be another tool of the CCP and the government that is used as “deliberative policy consultation under an authoritarian regime” (Tang & Dryzek, 2014, p. 110). The new regulation document also refers to the board as a monitoring or oversight body. This role, the author would argue, is a step towards asserting the authority of public stakeholders. The movement towards an oversight role would require the support of institutional leaders and far greater transparency if the board is to assume a role in evaluating the quality of education of the university. If the board indeed carries forward its oversight role, a protocol needs to be put in place to make that effective.

What seems interesting, though, is that, judging from the membership proposed in the new regulations, the future Chinese board would resemble the membership categories of the governing board in American universities, having a broader membership base than it currently does (being dominated by prominent business leaders as on a sounding board). That being said, the new regulation cleverly circumvents the contentious and difficult issue of the board’s involvement in governance by delegating it an oversight and evaluative role with regard to the quality of education only, rather than the performance of the university administration. It thus does not challenge the current dual governance framework, the presidential-responsibility system under the leadership of the CCP committee. Nonetheless, the regulations have made progress in articulating the role of the board. To some extent, these regulations seem to be more rigorous than some of the bylaws of sounding boards in Worth’s study (2008) in the United States, in which about one-third of the institutions did not have any bylaws or job descriptions for their sounding boards. If the Chinese universities follow the new regulations, the new board charters would be a big improvement on the existing ones in terms of clarity on the board’s role, composition, and operation. Section 5.1.2 identified the correlation between the creation of boards and the policy orientation of the time. The author would expect that with the new regulations on boards in place, more public institutions will set up a board, but perhaps with more prudence, deliberation, and certainty over its role and operations. Together with the regulations for academic councils and institutional charters, the new board regulations signal an
approach that is consistent with the government’s guerrilla-style policy making processes, that is, allowing flexibility and local improvisation so that better policies can be made, or in Heilmann’s words (2011), decentralized experimentation. The author would argue this use of institutionalization after experimentation is characteristic of the CCP’s adaptive governance.

7.3.3 Opening up an intermediate social space

Together with the growth of the country’s economic wealth has come people’s increased awareness of their own economic interests as contributors and their rights as citizens (Liu & Béja, 2006). The party-state is responsive to these growing needs and has, to some extent, opened up an intermediate social space for people to participate, albeit still with many hurdles and restrictions. The opened space takes various forms—such as government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), grassroots NGOs, professional associations, and homeowner associations—that suggest the early emergence of a civil society, according to M. Wang’s (2011) edited book. What is worth noting is the change in the policy-making processes that requires prior consultation with stakeholders and emphasizes public accountability. Section 2.3.2 of Chapter 2 reviewed this gradual shift to more consultation and deliberation in making educational policies since the issuance of the Action Plan to Revitalize Education 2003-2007. In the same vein, consultation is also suggested for decision-making within institutions in order to take the stakeholder’s points of view into consideration. Such consultations are already taking place in the K–12 school system. Now the government is explicitly opening up such a space in higher education institutions and it entrusts the board of trustees—representatives of social elites—with that role. Given the persisting ideological control in higher education institutions, the party-state’s delegation of a consultative and deliberative role to social elites is remarkable.

In a sense, this opening up of a social space to boards of trustees in the university decision-making process is parallel to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). China’s Constitution stipulates that the country is led by the CCP which represents supreme state power over the State Council, which is the top executive body, and the National People’s Congress (NPC), which is the country’s top legislative body. The Party therefore maintains its control over the legislature and executive. According to the CPPCC Charter (CPPCC, 2004), the CPPCC conducts political consultations (zhengzhi xieshang in Chinese) on major state policies and important issues before and in the course of decision making; through proposals and
criticisms, it exercises democratic supervision (minzu jianju in Chinese) of law enforcement, policy applications, and the performance of state bureaucracy and its employees. It also participates in the discussion and management of state affairs (canzheng yizheng in Chinese) by providing advice and recommendations to the CCP and state agencies after conducting investigations, gathering feedback from the people, and submitting reports or proposals. These functions are carried out under the leadership of the CCP. The Charter stipulates that the National CPPCC is composed of representatives of the CCP, eight democratic parties, democrats with no party affiliations, various people's organizations, every ethnic group and all walks of life, compatriots from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, and returned overseas Chinese, as well as specially invited individuals (CPPCC, 2004). Studies have shown that the CPPCC does have some impact, but it does not “deal with fundamental questions of policy but rather with technical matters, environmental questions, or social issues” (Saich, 2011, p. 151).

Nonetheless, obviously the government does not want to see an open social space that could become a potential authority parallel to the state power in a way that would challenge the current political order. Similar to the role of the CPPCC, the new board regulations do not assign any decision-making authority to the board. The term that this new policy document used for such a body seems also to imply that the government does not want the public to confuse this advisory board with a governing body. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, the Chinese term that most boards currently use is dongshi hui. It is a historical term inherited to refer to the governing body of schools and universities that followed the American tradition. The term is still used now to refer to the American governing board. Also, the Chinese word dongshi hui is more often used to mean a collective body of individual members based on their capital shares, for example, the governing body of a company. The new regulation document now uses the term lishi hui and includes a note to the effect that the regulations also apply to dongshi hui. The new term lishi hui could be translated as “council”, and the Chinese word lishi hui implies a collective body of individuals based on their personal creditability, such as the governing or advisory body of a social organization. Interestingly, among the 32 universities whose university charters have been approved by the MOE, 16 of them had created a board of trustees with the Chinese name dongshi hui or xiaodong hui when this study started in 2011, but now seven of them have changed the

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22 The CPPCC is headed by a member from the Standing Committee of the CCP’s Politburo.
name to new term *lishi hui* in their university charters. The subtle change of terminology from a corporate shareholder implication to a personal credibility connotation seems to capture the essential roles of the Chinese public board more accurately. The author would speculate that the board of trustees will become more common among Chinese universities in the future and that more universities will use the term *lishi hui* for their existing or newly created board of trustees.  

Starting with the K–12 school system, then moving to vocational training colleges, and now to regular, public higher education institutions, the government seems to have gradually expanded the space for stakeholders’ participation by allowing them to get involved through consultation, deliberation, and even oversight. The author would argue that CCP’s latitude towards more participation has occurred under the pressure of the rise of the stakeholder society, which has realized individuals’ rights to participation and demanded transparency and decision-making powers, a progressive trend in Chinese society. The new policy document on boards provides legitimacy for board involvement. However, at the same time, the CCP is constantly on guard against possible proliferation of this participation that may potentially pose a threat to its control, a lesson it learned from the Tian’anmen incident of 1989 and the *Falun gong* cult of 1999 (Simon, 2013). Caught in between, the CCP has vacillated back and forth, sometimes pledging to open more space and sometimes tightening control. This sway indicates that the CCP itself is trying out different approaches to governance that could give it legitimacy for staying in power. The issuance of the board regulations is a good sign and at least the CCP is considering a role for external as well as more internal stakeholders in institutional governance.

The inclusion of rank-and-file faculty and especially students on the board, as was proposed in the new regulation, signifies a big step forward in terms of expanding stakeholder participation. Faculty and student memberships on the governing bodies of universities have been achieved in many higher education systems around the world, but this is rarely the case in China. Chinese

23 Among the 32 university charters that have been approved by the MOE Seventeen universities, 17 of them mentioned that they have created or will create a university affairs council or a similar body as advisory body to the university. According to these charters, this council is mainly composed of internal members, such as current and retired faculty and staff, and some may also include students and other stakeholders from within and outside of the university. The newly issued regulations on board of trustees also apply to this university affairs council.
universities are very much bureaucratized; decision-making authority is highly concentrated in administrative officials (Ngok, 2008). A wider range of stakeholders on the board, represented by rank-and-file faculty and student representatives, may help crack bureaucratization, bringing more transparency in decision-making processes and holding university leaders accountable.  

One should not be too optimistic about the immediate effectiveness of stakeholder participation, though, even with endorsement from the CCP. Boards of trustees have been in existence in Chinese public universities for over 30 years, and yet judging from the evidence from this study, there is still a lack of mechanisms that could effectively incorporate the board into the regular business of many universities. The non-existence of guidance from the government could be one factor for that, as some interviewees commented. However, board members as well as university leaders need to be educated and a participation culture needs to be cultivated. Participation is relatively new. It takes time for both university leaders and other stakeholders to figure out a better way for participation, consultation, and oversight to take place. Participants should have the competence and skills for participation to make it more effective. As B. He (2008) pointed out, “habituation” (p. 192) to participation and deliberation, which means making it a routine practice, is essential for sustainability. This could also help minimize the negative impact on the board as a result of changes in institutional leadership if the predecessor and the successor have different visions for their board, as shown in incidents to which some interviewees alluded.

One more important thing for the opening of an intermediate space is that participation from stakeholders, in the case of the board, from board members, be regarded as a partnership for improving institutions and institutional leadership rather than an antagonistic force. Given that now the board is officially assigned an monitoring and oversight role (e.g., in evaluating the quality of education) in addition to consultation and deliberation (e.g., in budgeting), university leaders will need to adapt to this renewed role of the board and make use of board members’ expertise and also critiques as a resource for improvement.

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24 A similar regulation document on academic councils that became effective in March 2014 did not include student membership on the council. However, it mentioned that the council could, based on the agendas of council meetings, set up a public gallery for relevant units of the university, faculty, and students.
To sum up, the pursuit of economic interests, the shift to institutionalization, and the emergence of a social space suggest that the board of trustees in China’s public universities is a derivative of the party-state’s adaptive governance. These factors underscore the features of the public board, and they determine what role the board could play. Findings from this study suggest that the four roles of the boards, as well as the many challenges associated with these bodies, are impacted by the afore-mentioned three characteristics of the party-state’s adaptive governance. On the other hand, it is possible that introducing boards into the public sector could pressure the party-state and institutions to adapt to new opportunities and challenges as a result of more stakeholder participation.

7.4 Conclusion

With regard to the board of trustees in Chinese public universities, at first glance it is a product of the rise of the stakeholder society. On the one hand, educational development (both from policy and an institutional perspective) requires the participation of societal stakeholders to support institutions, through collaboration, fundraising, or advising. On the other hand, institutions need to respond to societal needs by providing services. The board is thus a conduit for all these activities, connecting higher education institutions with social forces. The exchange of benefits becomes the primary incentive for this relationship. Second, in a subtle and yet decisive way, the role of the board is determined by the state–society relationship. When the state opens up an intermediate social space and invites societal stakeholders to participate in institutional governance, the board receives the legitimacy it requires to exist and function. How much authority it has depends on the extent to which the state allows public participation to evolve, and in what manner. So far, the board has been given an advisory role, allegedly including being a consultative, deliberative, and oversight body for institutional governance. Third, in a broad sense, the role of the board is affected by the adaptive governance practice of both the state and institutions. Ambiguity and flexibility characterize the articulation and operation of the board. What is certain, though, is that both the state and institutions are experimenting with possibilities, either improvised by themselves or borrowed from outside.

This study on public boards contributes to the literature in two ways. Practically, it fills in a statistical gap about the current development of boards in public universities by mapping out the
distribution and composition of public boards nationwide. Through analysis of normative institutional data (acquired from a national survey and board charters) and non-institutional, subjective perceptions about boards (obtained from interviews with board secretariat staff), this study is the first of its kind to present the role of the Chinese board based on primary sources with representative samples. Conceptually, the study investigates an educational phenomenon by putting it under the political and sociological microscope, illuminating the interlocking relationships among the political, social, and educational dimensions. It elevates the discussion of boards to a broader and more subtle terrain.

At the end of the second phase of the study, an executive summary of the questionnaire findings were distributed to all 40 participating institutions in September 2012. The summary was a shortened version of Chapter 5, and it identified many of the issues associated with the role and operation of the board, especially issues with the board charters, such as role ambiguity and the lack of operational mechanisms. The summary was well received. A number of interviewees told the researcher that they finally had some concrete and objective observations about their boards and that the summary would be used in the advocacy for more attention to board issues. One and a half years’ later, the Ministry of Education issued the regulation document on boards. Many of the issues identified in the executive summary were somehow addressed. It is encouraging to see the change.

This study has achieved its objective of exploring the role of the board. Nonetheless, it has also identified additional questions in the course of the research journey. Future research could study the board from the perspective of current and past university leaders and board members, trying to understand their experiences with the board. There could also be case studies of several boards in a comparative framework. Topics such as rationales for creating a board, motivations for being a board member, and the relationship between the board and other governing and non-governing bodies of the institution could be investigated. Some faculties within institutions have created a board of trustees which reportedly has some or considerable decision-making authority. These would also be good cases for further investigation. Also, because data collection for this study was completed before the new regulation on boards of trustees was issued, a comparison of boards before and after the regulation could use this study as a reference point and examine the impact of the new regulation. More archival work investigating the history of individual boards since the Republican era and more careful documentation of boards’ composition, membership,
and activities will certainly shed new light on the Chinese public boards. Much further research on boards is needed so that they can better serve their institutions for the public good.

The board of trustees is a concept foreign to China which is based on a totally different political and educational governance ideology. Since it was imported to Chinese public higher education 90 years ago, it has demonstrated a fascinating, adaptive development trajectory. Now that the party-state has articulated its vision of the public board, whether this vision can be translated into practice and if so, how, is intriguing. It might even be possible for the board to stretch its assigned role and assume more power. After all, historically, the adaptive state is not afraid of playing wild cards.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation Email to Board Secretariats

(text body)

Dear Board Secretariat:

I would like to invite your institution to participate in this important study on the current development of boards of trustees in public universities in China. Your participation would involve answering a short questionnaire about the history and composition of the board of trustees in your university that may take 30 minutes to complete, as well as providing your board charter and member list. In return, you will receive a comprehensive report on the findings of this questionnaire, including the most recent statistics on Chinese public boards and their roles and functions. This report will offer you the opportunity to compare your board with those of other institutions.

The value of boards of trustees is recognized in the National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development 2010–2020. This study attempts to obtain and analyze empirical evidence on the development of Chinese public boards. Please refer to the attached letter for details on the objective of this study, its data collection methods, and your rights as a participating institution. Also attached please find the questionnaire which is expected to be returned to the researcher in two weeks’ time from now.

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions about the study.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request!

Sincerely,

Sharon Xiaoxu Li
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education Program
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto
252 Bloor St. West
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6 Canada
Telephone (Canada): +1 647 968-8861
Telephone (China): +86 1360-177-0437
Email: SharonX.Li@utoronto.ca
Appendix B: Invitation Letter to Board Secretariats
(written on OISE/UT letterhead as attachment to the invitation email)

Date:

Dear Board Secretariat:

I would like to invite your institution to participate in this important study on the current development of boards of trustees in public universities in China. Your participation would involve answering a short questionnaire about the history and composition of the board of trustees in your university that may take 30 minutes to complete. In return, you will receive a comprehensive report on the findings of this questionnaire, including the most recent statistics on Chinese public boards and their roles and functions. This report will offer you the opportunity to compare your board with those of other institutions.

The value of boards of trustees is recognized in the National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development 2010–2020. This study attempts to obtain and analyze empirical evidence on the development of Chinese public boards, and it gains support from Professor Wang Ge, Chair of the Society for Board Studies (affiliated with the Chinese Association of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education), who thinks the findings of this study will contribute to knowledge on Chinese public boards. The study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, under the supervision of Professor Glen A. Jones. The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Boards of the University of Toronto. Should you have any questions regarding your rights as a participating institution, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto, at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or +1 416-946-3273. If you have any questions about the research itself, please contact me at SharonX.Li@utoronto.ca or my supervisor Dr. Glen A. Jones at glen.jones@utoronto.ca.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to skip any question in the questionnaire. You may withdraw from this study at any time without any consequence, and your answers will not be included in the final analyses. Your institution will remain anonymous and it will not be identified in the study. The purpose of asking you to fill in your institution’s name in the questionnaire is only to remove you from the e-mailing list once your questionnaire has been returned to the researcher. Returned questionnaires will be number-coded and locked in a secure place in the researcher’s home. No one other than the researcher herself will have access to the questionnaires and they will be deleted at the end of a five-year period. There is no foreseeable risk to your institution’s participation in this study. You or your institution will not be judged or evaluated in any way.

To participate in this study, I would ask you to 1) complete the attached questionnaire, 2) provide an up-to-date board charter, and 3) provide a list of your board members, including their names, titles, affiliated institutions, and genders. This board member information will be used to analyze
board composition. Within two weeks of receiving this invitation, please email these documents to the researcher at SharonX.Li@utoronto.ca.

Your positive response to this e-mail is considered informed consent that you have agreed to participate in the study. If you wish to get a report of the questionnaire findings, please indicate so in your email while returning the questionnaire and the requested documents. The report will be emailed to you after the analysis is completed.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request!

Sincerely,

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E-mail: glen.jones@utoronto.ca
Appendix C: Questionnaire for Board Secretariats

(as attachment to the invitation email to board secretariats)

**Part 1**

1. The name of your institution is: ____________________________

2. When was the board of trustees in your university created?  
   Year ____________________________________________________

3. How many board members did you have then? How many members are on the board now?  
   Then ____________________________________________________________  
   Present __________________________________________________________

4. Please indicate the number of board members on the current board for the following member categories:  
   | Internal |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | External |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | Male |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | Female |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | From Mainland China |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | From Hong Kong, Macao, & Taiwan |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | From foreign countries |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | Honorary members |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | Corporate members |  |  |  |  |  |  

5. Please indicate the number of **internal** board members for the following member categories:  
   | Faculty |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | Administration |  |  |  |  |  |  

6. Please indicate the number of **external** board members for the following member categories:  
   | Government |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | Industry |  |  |  |  |  |  
   | Other fields |  |  |  |  |  |  

7. How often does the board meet?
   - [ ] Once a year
   - [ ] Twice a year
   - [ ] Three times a year
   - [ ] Once every two years
   - [ ] Other, Please specify: ______________

8. How long are usually the board meetings?
   - [ ] Half a day
   - [ ] One day
   - [ ] One day and a half
   - [ ] Two days
   - [ ] Other, Please specify: ______________

9. How many staff members are there in the Secretariat? ____________

10. Which administrative unit is the Secretariat affiliated with?
    - [ ] Party Committee Office
    - [ ] President’s Office
    - [ ] Collaboration/Development Office
    - [ ] Foreign Relations Office
    - [ ] Social Resource Office
    - [ ] Alumni Office
    - [ ] Educational Foundation Office
    - [ ] Other, Please specify: ______________

11. What are the responsibilities of the above-selected unit?

Part 2

1. What are the responsibilities of the board?

2. Who nominates candidates for board members?

3. Who appoints board members?
4. What are the criteria for selecting a board member?

5. What are the procedures to select a board member?

6. Who decides on the agenda for board meetings?

7. Is there a dedicated section for board information on your institutional website?
   □ Yes     □ No

8. Do you have additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share with the researcher?

Reminder: Please return this questionnaire, together with your board charter and the list of board members (including their names, titles, affiliated institutions, and genders) to:
SharonX.li@utoronto.ca

Thank you for your participation.
You will receive a report of the findings of this questionnaire once the study is completed.

**Researcher Contact Information**
Sharon Xiaoxu Li
Telephone (Canada): +1 647 968-8861
Telephone (China): +86 1360-177-0437
Email: SharonX.Li@utoronto.ca
Appendix D: Email Invitation to Board Secretariat Staff for Participation in Interviews

{text body}

Date:

Dear __________:

I would like to invite you to participate in this important study on the role of board of trustees in public universities in China. Your participation would involve a 45-minute in-person or interview on your experiences with board matters in your institution. In return, you will receive a comprehensive report on the most recent statistics on Chinese public boards and their roles and functions, which you might find of interest.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you will not be personally identified in the research reports. Should you have any questions about the study, please contact me at SharonX.Li@utoronto.ca.

Your positive response to this e-mail is considered as consent and that you have agreed to participate in the study. Please see the attached consent form for details on the objective of this study, its data collection methods, and your rights as a participant. After receiving your consent, I would like to call your office to schedule a 45-minute interview.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request!

Sincerely,

Sharon Xiaoxu Li

Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education Program
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto
252 Bloor St. West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6 Canada
Telephone (Canada): +1 647 968-8861
Telephone (China): +86 1360-177-0437
Email: SharonX.Li@utoronto.ca
Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

(on OISE/UT letterhead as attachment to the email invitation)

Date:

Dear Participant:

I would like to invite you to participate in this study on the role of board of trustees in public universities in China. Participation in this study will involve answering a few open-ended questions about your involvement in board matters of your institution. The interview will last 45 minutes and will be conducted in person. A telephone interview could also be arranged upon your request.

Your participation would be part of a larger study, the objective of which is to obtain and analyze empirical evidence on how the role of the board is carried out, that is, how the boards function, how the board contribute to the work of the university, and the nature of the relationship between the boards and the university. The study intends to recruit board secretariat staff from all the 40 institutions that participated in the questionnaire that you responded in the spring of 2013. The study results will be relevant to higher education policy as well as to the improvement of institutional governance; it will advance knowledge on how the boards, being adopted from the Western university system, would impact university-society relationships and the university governance dynamics in the unique Chinese context. The study gains support from Professor Wang Ge, Chair of the Society for Board Studies (affiliated with the Chinese Association of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education), who thinks the findings of this study will contribute to knowledge on Chinese public boards. The study is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, under the supervision of Professor Glen A. Jones.

This study will be carried out in accordance with the University of Toronto ethical standards for research. Your participation is completely voluntary. The interview will be conducted at a place where you would feel comfortable to talk, such as your office or a public place. You are free to decline to answer any question during the interview; a specific explanation is not required. You may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence; any information, whether in written form or audiotape, will then be eliminated from the project. No value judgments will be placed on your responses. At no time will you be judged or evaluated and at no time be at risk of harm. Before the interview starts, this consent form will be reviewed and you will sign the form if you agree to participate. The interview will not be audio-taped and only notes will be taken with your permission. The notes will be typed into digital files and destroyed afterwards. All data will be stored electronically and anonymously; the interview notes will be deleted by the end of a five-year period. The study results will not be published other than in standard academic venues. Your identity will remain confidential (only pseudonyms will be used). There are no foreseeable risks to your participation in this study. The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Boards of the University of Toronto. Should you have any questions regarding your rights as a
participant, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto, at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or +1 416-946-3273. If you have any questions about the research itself, please contact me at SharonX.Li@utoronto.ca or my supervisor Dr. Glen A. Jones at glen.jones@utoronto.ca.

Your positive response to this e-mail is considered as consent and that you have agreed to participate in the study. You will be given the option of receiving a report of the study by the end of the interview. If you are interested, the report will be emailed to you when the study is completed.

Thank you in advance for your participation!

Sincerely,

Sharon Xiaoxu Li
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E-mail: glen.jones@utoronto.ca
Appendix F: Interview Protocol for Board Secretariat Staff

Hello _______________. Nice to meet you. Thank you for setting aside this time for our interview. Just before we get into our first question I’ll briefly summarize this project: I am interested in knowing the role of board of trustees in public universities in China. I am interested in learning how you have been involved in the board matters of your university and your views on the role of the board of your university. You can withdraw your participation at anytime without any consequence and you can refuse to answer any interview question. No value judgments will be placed on your responses. At no time will you be judged or evaluated and at no time be at risk of harm. Your identity will remain confidential in the study results (only pseudonyms will be used). Would you like me to review the consent form for other details? Do you have any questions about the study or the consent form? May I take notes of your responses to the questions? If you have no further questions, we will proceed with the interview.

Thank you.

1. What is/are your title(s)?
2. How long have you been involved in board matters in your institution?
3. In what ways are you involved in board matters?
4. How does the board contribute to the work of the university?
5. What are the benefits that the university could bring to board members?
6. What are your major job responsibilities?
7. How do you perceive the relationship between the board and the university? What relationship between the two do you wish to see in the future?
8. What do you think is the role of board at present?
9. How does the institution (or senior administrators) position the board?
10. What might be the challenges for the board to play its role? How does the university communicate with board members and vice versa?
11. To the best of you knowledge, what agendas do board general meetings usually involve?
12. The Ministry of Education requires any university that has a board to define the role, composition and regulations for their board in their University Charter. Has your office/department started this work?
13. What do you think your office/department should do more of?
14. Do you experience any pressure or stress in association with board-related work?
15. What do you want to know most about the board of other institutions?
16. What do you expect this study could bring to you?
17. Do you have official communication or exchange with the board secretariats of other universities?
18. Do you have additional thoughts or comments on this study of boards?