

China's World-Class 2.0: Towards More Institutionalized and Participatory Policymaking?

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Abstract

China's quest to have world-class universities has entered a new phase since 2015, with the 'Double World-Class Project' replacing the '985 Project' and the '211 Project' launched in the 1990s. The transition from World-Class 1.0 to World-Class 2.0 provides a good window onto changes in China's policymaking. The prevailing literature has identified broad trends such as institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation. While this paper finds evidence in support of the prevailing literature, it also challenges the thesis of institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation. The celebrated evolution from 'hierarchical governance' to 'network governance' or from 'consultation' to 'deliberation' in China's policymaking, however desirable, is premature – especially for multi-billion, high-stakes policy initiatives such as the 'Double World-Class Project'.

Keywords: policymaking, Double World-Class Project, institutionalization, decentralization, world-class universities

Introduction

China launched the 'Double World-Class Project' in 2015 to develop world-class universities and disciplines. The full list of participating universities was announced in September 2017, consisting of 42 to be developed into world-class institutions ('World-Class Universities' hereafter) and another 95 into universities with world-class disciplines ('Universities with World-Class Disciplines' hereafter). Dubbed as 'World-Class 2.0', the Double World-Class Project replaces the '211 Project' and '985 Project', initiated in the 1990s to advance Chinese universities in major international league tables (Altbach 2013; Ngok and Guo 2008; Wang et al. 2013).¹ As China's most important initiative in higher education under the Xi Jinping leadership, this new multibillion project immediately attracted attention from university ranking organizations (Grove 2017), online news outlets (Gao 2017;

Huang 2017; Newton-Tanzer 2017) and education scholars (Peters and Besley 2018).

The Double World-Class Project provides a good opportunity to observe China's often opaque policymaking. A comparison with the 985 Project and the 211 Project allows for even more insights. The prevailing literature on China's governance and policymaking has focused much attention on institutionalization (Chen and Naughton 2016), fragmentation (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Mertha 2009), decentralization (Mok 2002; Ngok 2007) and expanded consultation (Benner et al. 2012). Research on China's education policymaking largely agrees with these broad themes. For instance, Han and Ye (2017: 390) note that the most important changes in China's education policymaking are 'the transition from a Party-dominant practice to one primarily driven by the central government, the enhanced role of higher education institutions (HIEs) and scholars as "professional interest group" in the Chinese context and the increasing participation of non-governmental actors in the policymaking process'.

However, as Benner et al. (2012: 269) comment, 'how this balance [of the relationship between central goal articulation and decentralized deliberation], unstable as it is and perhaps must be, will play out in the future is a key issue for students of Chinese politics in the years to come'. There is still much ambiguity within the existing theories and models regarding the structures, processes and outcomes of China's policymaking. Due to unequal power relations among various policy stakeholders, the expansion of public and expert consultation does not necessarily result in a shift from top-down steering to bottom-up policymaking, or from hierarchical governance to polycentric governance. For instance, while public participation is necessary for policy responsiveness and representativeness, it may be 'used for public relations and propaganda purposes to legitimate the still-government-dominated policymaking process' (Han and Ye 2017: 407). More broadly, institutionalization, decentralization and bottom-up participation are multifaceted processes. As policy issues are becoming increasingly complex, studies looking for evidence of these trends probably overlook signs of irregularity, recentralization and top-down steering.

This paper seeks to make a nuanced assessment of changes in China's education policymaking by comparing the new Double World-Class Project with the previous 985 Project. In line with the prevailing literature, it focuses on the broad themes of institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation. Nonetheless, it pays as much

attention to evidence in support of these themes as to evidence challenging them. In terms of methodology, the paper relies on documentary analysis, drawing heavily on government documents, press releases by stakeholder ministries, written accounts by participants, published research papers and media reports. Documentary analysis is an often-used methodology for research on China's education policymaking (Han and Ye 2017).

Changing Patterns of Policymaking in China: Literature Review

Informed by the large and diverse literature on neoliberalism, governance and globalization, research on China's policymaking has identified a number of broad and somewhat overlapping themes. One is the institutionalization of rules and procedures that regulate policymaking (Liu et al. 2011; Ma and Lin 2012). The 'institutionalization paradigm' is widely found in research on China's science and technology (S&T) governance. Chen and Naughton (2016) offer a useful operational definition. Policy process institutionalization increases as '(a) the number and type of interest/opinion groups routinely represented increases; (b) tasks in the policy process are assigned to different actors in predictable ways; (c) the complexity and level of detail of policy outcomes increases; and (d) objectives and criteria of policy are available that can serve as the basis for discussion and argument among diverse opinion groups'. This view of institutionalization highlights greater policy rationalization, interest representation, specialization, predictability and accountability. According to Chen and Naughton (2016), institutionalization is a growing trend in nearly every policy area in China.

A second broad theme, well established in research on China's economic and social policy, is decentralization. In the 1980s, fiscal decentralization was used to make local governments commit to economic growth. The central government devolved financial responsibilities to the provincial government in the form of fiscal contracts. In return, provincial governments were allowed to retain most of the revenues. The same arrangement was replicated down the government hierarchy from provincial to prefectural and county governments. Economists have used fiscal decentralization to explain China's remarkable growth. Some scholars have gone even further to argue that such a central-local relationship has far-reaching consequences beyond economic growth.

It has led to institutional building in the form of 'market preserving federalism' (Montinola et al. 1995; Qian and Weingast 1997).

Social policy scholars pay more attention to the downside of fiscal decentralization. In the case of basic education, the responsibility for provision and funding was further pushed down from county governments to township governments and even villages (Zhao 2009). In the 1980s and 1990s, excessive decentralization resulted in unprecedented levels of inequality in per-student spending between places where village and township governments found a new source of funding in the thriving Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs) and those where local governments had to rely on educational surcharges and tuition fees collected from farming households and student families (Hannum 2003). The same pattern was also observed for healthcare (Zhang and Kanbur 2005).

In many places where local governments had few TVEs to tap into, the strategy of decentralization became increasingly difficult to sustain. Complaints and protests against peasant burdens involving farming households began to threaten rural stability in the 1990s. Likewise, unpaid salaries for teachers undermined the stability and quality of rural education. In the 2000s, China started to shift away from excessive decentralization towards some degree of recentralization in an effort to build a more stable and regularized financing mechanism, evidenced in the considerably higher share of central government spending on education (Zhao et al. 2018).

By comparison, the strategy of decentralization works better for higher education, in large part because decentralization in higher education has never been as extreme as in basic education. Experimentation in this area first appeared in Guangdong in the form of 'joint development', a co-funding scheme for universities previously financed by central ministries. In 1993, the State Education Commission and Guangdong provincial government reached an agreement to jointly administer and fund Sun Yat-Sen University and South China University of Technology, the top two universities in Guangdong. The shift to the dual leadership did not reduce the financial support from central government, but secured commitment from the provincial government to provide capital investment funds to the two universities under joint development. The Guangdong experience was later promoted nationwide. In 1995, the central government endorsed 'joint development' as one of the four major strategies to reform China's higher education system (Mok 2005).²

While there has been a clear trend towards decentralization in higher education, there are also cases of recentralization. A different type of

'joint development' emerged in the 2000s. To help inland provinces develop their higher education facilities, the central government decided in 2004 to select one locally administered university for priority funding through 'joint development' in each of the 12 provinces in the central and western regions where there are no centrally administered universities (Mok 2005).

A third broad theme is expanded participation. Research on China's S&T has noted the salient role that prominent scientists play in initiating and planning S&T development. For instance, the National High Technology Programme, one of China's earliest R&D programmes in the post-Mao period, was created based on a letter submitted to national leaders by four prominent scientists. The scientists stressed the need for accelerating China's high-tech development, reminding the leaders of US Strategic Defense Initiatives and Europe's EUREKA Programme. After Deng Xiaoping's approval, the State Council mobilized hundreds of experts in 1986 to draft an 'Outline for Development of High Technology'. The resulting programme, also known as the '863 Programme', remains one of the most important national S&T initiatives today. Another programme – National Key Basic Research Programme – came about in a similar way. A group of concerned scientists made a proposal through China's top advisory body – the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference – in March 1997 that the government should give more support to basic research. Then Premier Li Peng heeded to the suggestion and a new programme known as the '973 Programme' was created (Benner et al. 2012). Over time, China's S&T policymaking has been increasingly institutionalized, with the five-year plans being the most structured tool for setting agendas and priorities, supplemented by the medium- and long-term plans with varying time spans up to 15 or more years. The regular planning cycle provides an institutionalized channel for scientists to participate in China's S&T policymaking (Zhao 2014).

Similarly, consultation with experts has been increasingly used in China's education policymaking (Han and Ye 2017) and healthcare reform (Thompson 2009). In the case of healthcare, China's Healthcare System Reform Coordinating Small Group invited six expert organizations in March 2007 to submit reform proposals, including Peking University, Fudan University, Development Research Center of the State Council, the World Health Organization, the World Bank and McKinsey & Company. Although none of the proposals was released publicly, 'informed opinions and information are widely available' and the debate among invited scholars 'indicates a positive trend toward inclusiveness in

Chinese policymaking' (Thompson 2009: 65). In the case of education policymaking, Han and Ye (2017: 405) note that higher education institutions and scholars have been incorporated into China's policymaking process as 'professional interest groups'.

Not only is expert consultation on the rise, public participation in policymaking has also been growing. A case study of the 'Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)' suggests that this plan was the 'Party and central government's first major effort to incorporate a broad spectrum of public opinion in China's policymaking process, especially those non-governmental policy actors such as civil think tanks, individual citizens and businessmen' and that 'the degree and scope of public participation in the creation of the *Outline* were unprecedented' (Han and Ye 2017: 406–407).

Against the broad trend of institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation, there are still unanswered questions regarding the extent and pattern of changes in China's policymaking. Scholars have used 'policy network' theory to describe and analyse China's education policymaking. Drawing on Marsh and Rhodes' (1992) taxonomy that classifies a policy network based on stability, inclusiveness and power relations within it, Han and Ye (2017: 393) have mapped the evolution of China's education policymaking from a 'policy community' in the 1980s, which, as the most integrated type of policy network, features 'a limited number of actors and a clear hierarchical relationship among them', to an 'issue network' by 2010, which is at the opposite end of the 'policy community' and characterized by 'a large number of heterogeneous actors managing various types and amounts of resources'. However, given unequal power relations among heterogeneous policy stakeholders in the Chinese context, one has to cast doubt on whether China has shifted from 'hierarchical governance' to 'network governance'. Likewise, in pondering the political significance of public participation observed in the making of China's healthcare reform, as unveiled in 2009, Kornreich et al. (2012: 178) caution against confusing consultation as 'a means of two-way communication employed by decision-makers solely to obtain information' with deliberation, which implies responsive decision-makers doing more than solicit input. Taken together, there still needs to be nuanced, in-depth analysis of specific cases to assess the extent and nature of changes in China's policymaking.

The Making of the 985 Project and the Double World-Class Project

China's World-Class 1.0 is associated with the 985 Project. On 4 May 1998, then President Jiang Zemin declared at the centennial celebration of Peking University, 'To achieve modernization, China should have several advanced, world-class universities'. China's Ministry of Education (MOE) acted on Jiang's speech to launch what later became known as the 985 Project.

Details of the making of the 985 Project can be found in Chen (2011). In a nutshell, it involved collaboration between university and government in a process that was first 'bottom up' and then 'top down'. Peking University, which symbolizes China's modern institutions of higher learning, planned to celebrate its 100th anniversary on 4 May 1998. In February 1998, the MOE and the Municipal Government of Beijing jointly held a meeting to discuss the Peking University president's report on the preparatory work for the centennial celebration. The three parties agreed that Peking University would propose a plan to invite President Jiang Zemin and other leaders to attend the centennial celebration and the MOE and Beijing Municipal Government would jointly draft a request to the General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party for approval. In line with established practice, Peking University would prepare the speech for President Jiang Zemin. The University clearly stated in the draft that 'to achieve modernization, China should have several advanced, world-class socialist universities'. When the draft was sent to the Central Committee for approval, the statement was modified from 'several advanced, world-class socialist universities' to 'several advanced, world-class universities'. Finally, the centennial celebration was held on 4 May 1998 at the Great Hall of the People, with all the top leaders in attendance and Jiang Zemin delivered the keynote speech prepared by Peking University. The MOE seized this opportunity to roll out the 'Action Plan for Revitalizing Education in the Twenty-First Century', which contained plans to build world-class universities.

Starting with targeted support for Peking University and Tsinghua University, the 985 Project passed through three stages (1999–2002, 2004–2007 and 2009–2013), being expanded to nine universities during Phase 1 and eventually to 39 (Zong and Zhang 2017). Without explicit rules and criteria governing the selection process, the 985 Project lacked transparency (Wang 2011). Moreover, as the membership in this elite league was fixed, the 985 Project solidified

stratification between participating universities and those excluded (Zong and Zhang 2017).

The Double World-Class Project, or China's World-Class 2.0, is associated with leadership succession from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. It officially started in October 2015 when China's State Council released the 'Overall Plan on Coordinating Development of World-Class Universities and World-Class Disciplines'. The document sets out targets and basic principles for the project. China's MOE, Ministry of Finance (MOF) and National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) followed up in January 2017 with a document specifying implementation measures.

Compared with the 985 Project, the Double World-Class Project did not start as a bottom-up proposal. Instead, with the succession of leadership, there were growing calls for 'top-level design' to make reforms more coordinated, comprehensive and determined. It was widely perceived that towards the end of Hu Jintao leadership, China's reform had become too fragmented and reached stalemate. The solution, endorsed by the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2013, was to comprehensively deepen reform by strengthening top-level design. In this context, the Double World-Class Project has stronger top-down features than the 985 Project. In terms of project initiation, China's transition from World-Class 1.0 to 2.0 does not conform to the general pattern of shifting from top-down to bottom-up policymaking.

Another major change is that the selection process for participating universities has become more transparent and rule based. Procedurally, it involved four steps. Step 1 was the setting up of an expert committee headed by Han Qide, vice chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and president of the Chinese Society for Science and Technology. Members of this committee are from central ministries, universities, research organizations, professional associations and consulting organizations. Step 2 was the selection of a list of 137 universities by the expert committee based on third-party evaluations and consideration of various factors such as national strategies, industrial needs and regional development. These universities have one or more disciplines that can be developed into world-class ones. Out of the 137 universities, the expert committee further selected 42 to be developed into world-class universities. Step 3 was the development of a work plan by universities on the proposed list. After the review by provincial governments or central ministries in charge of those universi-

ties, the individual work plans were submitted to the MOE, MOF and NDRC. The expert committee was asked to give detailed comments on each plan. The MOE, MOF and NDRC then gave instructions to each university to revise their work plan. Step 4 represented the finalization of the list of 'World-Class Universities' and 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines' by the MOE, MOF and NDRC before submission to the State Council for approval. After approval, the MOE, MOF and NDRC released the list on 20 September 2017.³

The MOE, MOF and NDRC appointed an expert committee to oversee the selection process. The full list of committee members has not been released. Nevertheless, a published interview with the MOE, MOF and NDRC officials reveals that included in the committee are officials from central ministries and experts from higher education institutions, professional associations and consulting organizations.⁴ Online sources suggest that some of the committee members are former presidents of China's most renowned universities, such as Huang Daren, former president of Sun Ya-Sen University and Zhong Binglin, former president of Beijing Normal University (e.g., Huang 2017). Notably, the published interview with MOE, MOF and NDRC officials highlights the presence of representatives from the disciplines of Marxism, Chinese traditional culture and political education.⁵

To further rationalize the selection process, third-party evaluations were systematically used for the first time to assist in decision-making. The MOE, MOF and NDRC did not name any specific rating agencies but revealed that the expert committee consulted both domestic third-party evaluations and foreign-based world university rankings. It is likely that the best-known rankings, such as QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education World University Rankings, were instrumental in selecting universities and disciplines for the Double World-Class Project.

Analysing the Extent and Patterns of Change

This section compares China's World-Class 1.0 and World-Class 2.0 against the three broad themes of institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation. Compared with the 985 Project, there is clear evidence that the Double World-Class Project demonstrates greater institutionalization in terms of selection and project management. As described earlier, the 985 Project lacked clear and explicit rules in the selection process. Peking University and Tsinghua University were

the first batch to be included in the project, followed by seven other universities. Together they formed Tier 1 universities, accounting for over 40 per cent of total funding in Phase 1 (1999–2002) and Phase 2 (2004–2007) (Wang 2011). Including the nine Tier 1 universities, a total of 34 universities made the list in Phase 1; another five were added in Phase 2. Due to budgetary constraints at the end of Phase 2, the central government decided not to expand the list further (Zong and Zhang 2017). Many universities on a par with the 30 Tier 2 universities in terms of performance and quality were thus excluded (Cheng 2011). Not surprisingly, the 985 Project has been widely criticized for the lack of transparent, fair and rule-based selection (Chen 2011; Cheng 2011; Yan 2011; Zong and Zhang 2017).

By comparison, through its top-level design, the Double World-Class Project set clearer rules and procedures from the very beginning. In particular, an expert committee was set up to oversee the nomination and selection of participating universities. Notably, the expert committee systematically used third-party evaluations to assist the decision-making. According to the joint press release by the MOE, MOF and NDRC, the expert committee consulted four types of domestic third-party evaluation: Type 1 focusing on the quality of undergraduate and graduate education; Type 2 on the academic performance of individual disciplines; Type 3 on the 'social contribution' of universities under consideration, measured by government awards; and Type 4 based on 'policy-oriented factors', such as the ability to serve national needs and strategic plans.⁶ In addition, international third-party evaluations were also used to rank individual disciplines in terms of academic performance and international recognition. According to Huang Daren (2017), a member of the expert committee, the Double World-Class Project allowed the expert committee to play a larger role in the nomination and selection process, which was 'strict and serious' and involved deliberation and registered ballots.

Chen and Naughton (2016) view increasing institutionalization as a result of efforts at rationalizing policymaking by assigning tasks in the policy process to specialized actors and making objectives and criteria of policy available to serve as the basis for discussion and deliberation. If we follow their operational definition, there is clear evidence for the institutionalization thesis. Compared with the 985 Project, the Double World-Class Project gave the expert committee a larger role in the selection process and for the first time systematically used third-party evaluations, which help to rationalize policymaking.

In contrast to the clear trend towards greater institutionalization, the trend towards decentralization is much more ambiguous. Decentralization is a multidimensional concept encompassing finance, control and delivery (Cummings and Riddell 1994). It is often believed that decentralized financing would lead to decentralized control. However, these two aspects of decentralization are conceptually and analytically different. In terms of financial support, the central government co-funded the 985 Project with the provincial governments where the participating universities were located. The Double World-Class Project will also co-fund participating universities by the central and provincial governments. Details of the arrangement are not publicly available yet. Nonetheless, due to budgetary constraints, the central government indicates that it will not substantially increase spending on the Double World-Class Project from that supplied to the 985 Project. In contrast, to have more universities within their jurisdiction on the list of the Double World-Class Project, provincial governments have tried – within their financial capability – to outcompete their rivals by showing their strong commitment and generous support for their universities (Bi 2017). Provincial governments will probably play a larger role in financing the Double World-Class Project than the 985 Project. The decentralization thesis is therefore likely to gain support from the financing point of view. Indeed, the media have lamented that this would benefit richer provinces such as Guangdong.⁷

However, a careful analysis of listed universities suggests that financial decentralization does not necessarily empower provincial governments vis-à-vis the central government in terms of decision-making. In the case of the Double World-Class Project, within the principles, guidelines and procedures set by the central government, there is little room for provincial governments to influence the outcome of selection. The central government from the very beginning decided that the Double World-Class Project would build on rather than overhaul the 985 Project and the 211 Project (State Council 2015). Structurally, the Double World-Class Project would have two lists, one for those to be developed into world-class universities and one for those having one or more world-class disciplines. In principle, 'World-Class Universities' would have a high overlap with 985 Project universities, while 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines' have a high overlap with 211 Project universities. This guideline not only restricted the influence of provincial governments, whether they sought to seek changes or maintain the status quo, but also set a limit on the expert committee in

the selection of universities for priority funding. It became clear to the expert committee that all 985 Project universities should make the list of 'World-Class Universities' and all 211 Project universities should be 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines' (Huang 2017).

In effect, out of the 42 'World-Class Universities', only three were non-985 Project universities. They are Xinjiang University (located in Xinjiang), Yunnan University (Yunnan) and Zhengzhou University (Henan). These three universities are from the less developed central and western regions. Therefore, one cannot argue that financial decentralization would empower richer provinces in the decision-making. It is equally notable that the selection of these universities is not entirely merit based. Xinjiang University is probably selected for strategic reasons. In recent years, violent attacks by Uighur militants using knives, guns or bombs have plagued Xinjiang. In response, China's central government has invested heavily in stability maintenance and socio-economic development in Xinjiang. The inclusion of Xinjiang University in the list of 'World-Class Universities' has to be understood in this larger context. By design, a 'World-Class University' should have one or more world-class disciplines. There were two ways to decide on the world-class disciplines. One was by the expert committee based on the ranking of third-party evaluations – this is a merit-based method. The other way was 'self-determined' by a number of selected universities for disciplines that fail to qualify as world-class disciplines in the first way. World-class disciplines decided the second way are therefore considered sub-par against those decided in the first way. Xinjiang University has three 'World-Class Disciplines': Marxism, chemistry and computer science. The three disciplines were decided by Xinjiang University rather than the expert committee, implying that Xinjiang University would not make it onto the list of 'World-Class Universities' if academic excellence were the sole standard.

Likewise, Zhengzhou University has three 'World-Class Disciplines', namely, clinical medicine, material science and chemistry, which were decided by the university instead of the expert committee. According to Tan Songhua, a member of State Education Advisory Council, there were 'special reasons' why Zhengzhou University made it onto the list of 'World-Class Universities'. A major contributing factor is that it is a top university in Henan, which is China's most populous province with over 100 million people, but which did not have a 985 Project university.⁸

Different from Xinjiang University and Zhengzhou University, Yunnan University has two 'World-Class Disciplines' (ethnic studies and

ecology) that met the standards set by the expert committee. Yunnan University's membership in the league of 'World-Class Universities' is therefore more convincing. Nonetheless, one cannot rule out that the national strategy to strengthen higher education in the western region worked in favour of Yunnan University. As expounded by Liu Haifeng, a member of the expert committee, 'Yunnan University was a key-point university back in the Republic era, Zhengzhou University is from the most populous province with a good momentum of development and Xinjiang University is important due to its location in a western ethnic minority region'.⁹ In other words, in considering which non-985 Project universities to be included in the list of 'World-Class Universities', priority was given to universities from the central and western provinces for reasons unrelated to a province's economic strength.

By contrast, it is the other list – 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines' – that shows a stronger association between a province's economic strength and the likelihood of having one or more non-211 Project universities on the list. As mentioned earlier, all former 211 Project universities were included in the list of 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines'. In addition, 25 non-211 Project universities made it onto the list. Table 1 presents the distribution of these universities by province. Nearly a third – eight out of 25 – are located in Beijing; Jiangsu and Shanghai combine to account for another third. The rest go to five other provinces. Notably, three are in Sichuan, which is in the western region. Tianjin and Zhejiang also gain from the expansion with two newly added universities. Guangdong and Henan take up the final two, leaving the other 23 provinces with no increase at all. Region-wise, the Chinese statistical system divides China into four regions: the eastern region (with the highest level of economic development), the northeastern region (the rust belt region with a high concentration of state-owned enterprises), the central region (with an intermediate level of economic development) and the western region (with the lowest level of economic development). Table 1 shows that in line with the decentralization thesis, the eastern region has disproportionately benefited from the expansion of the list of 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines' (compared with the list of 211 Project universities), accounting for 84 per cent – 21 out of 25 – of the newly added universities. Seen in this light, regional disparities have even widened during the transition from the 211 Project to the Double World-Class Project.

Regarding the thesis of expanded participation, there is some supporting evidence. In the case of the Double World-Class Project, the

role of experts in the policy process has been institutionalized and expanded through the expert committee. It is also clear that the Double World-Class Project has responded to some of the criticisms voiced by experts apropos the 985 Project. Despite the many achievements of the 985 Project, China's education experts have highlighted a number of problems. For one, the selection process was not transparent and merit based. For another, the membership of the 985 Project was fixed, resulting in a premature exclusion of many other aspiring universities and a lack of competition among the selected universities (Cheng 2011; Wang 2011; Zong and Zhang 2017). Echoing such criticisms, the first document on the Double World-Class Project, issued by the State Council (2015), explicitly acknowledged the problems of 'fixed membership, lacking competition and overlapping' (State Council 2015). In response, the second document, jointly issued by the MOE, MOF and NDRC (2017), decided to set up the expert committee to advise on how to build 'World-Class Universities' and 'World-Class Disciplines' and produce a list of universities to be funded by the project. It also decided to establish a 'dynamic adjustment' mechanism to encourage inter-university competition. At least three competition-enhancing measures have been introduced. One is the further split of 'World-Class Universities' into category A and category B. Category A universities are considered better and more competitive. The purpose is to create a sense of crisis for category B universities and urge them to catch up. Six out of 42 'World-Class Universities' fall into category B, including three 985 Project universities and three newly promoted universities (Xinjiang University, Yunnan University and Zhengzhou University). A second measure is the end of permanent membership. The list of 'World-Class Universities' or 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines' is subject to change. A dynamic adjustment mechanism has been introduced to reshuffle the lists based on regular performance evaluations. A third measure is the link between government funding and university performance. Underperforming universities will see their funding cut. If no improvement is made, their membership of the elite league will be in jeopardy (MOE et al. 2017). Officials in charge of the Double World-Class Project see these competition-enhancing measures as a major innovation that sufficiently sets it apart from the 985 Project and the 211 Project.¹⁰ It is clear that the Double World-Class Project has been responsive to the concerns and suggestions made by education experts.

However, there is also clear evidence of the limits of participation in the case of the Double World-Class Project. The types of policy stake-

holders are much less heterogeneous than what the 'issue network' approach implies. Within the government hierarchy, provincial governments had little impact on the selection of participating universities, due in large part to the principles and rules set by the central government. As described earlier, the overwhelming majority of seats—39 out of 42—in the league of 'World-Class Universities' were reserved for the 985 Project universities, leaving only three open to competition and lobbying. In the case of 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines', while more seats—25 out of 95—were available for competition and lobbying, the influence of provincial governments was seriously restricted by the rule that the majority of 'World-Class Disciplines' were to be determined by the expert committee based on third-party evaluations. Outside the government hierarchy, education experts were the main stakeholders in the making of the Double World-Class Project. Beyond this professional group, there were few non-governmental actors who had visible influence on the project. The high standards of 'World-Class Universities' or 'World-Class Disciplines' set up insurmountable barriers to participation by private universities as well as the majority of public universities.

Even for education experts, there are limits for their participation. While members of the expert committee had access to the policy process within the principles and rules set by the central government, one may argue that many education experts in this committee represented the interest of elite universities rather than the broader higher education sector, as evidenced in the overrepresentation of (former) university presidents on the committee. One can also argue that the way the expert committee was formed favoured certain disciplines. Not surprisingly, natural sciences have been favoured over social sciences. Moreover, while the quest for world-class status is the primary goal for natural sciences, the emphasis for philosophy and social sciences, as clearly stated in the second document on the Double World-Class Project (MOE et al. 2017), is on 'Chinese characteristics' (*zhongguo tese*), 'Chinese style' (*zhongguo fengge*) and 'Chinese appeal' (*zhongguo qipai*). In the joint press release by China's MOE, MOF and NDRC, officials in charge of the Double World-Class Project emphasized that when forming the expert committee, special consideration was given to representatives for 'Marxism, traditional Chinese culture and political education'.¹¹ It is illustrative to compare the presence of sociology or political science with Marxism on the list of 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines'. For sociology or political science, only two top universities were selected, compared with six universities for the discipline of Marxism.

To a great extent, the bifurcated attitudes towards natural sciences and social sciences mirror Xi Jinping's own views (Zhao 2016). Xi sees science and technology as the foundations of national strength and prosperity. He has promised to respect the creativity of scientists and support free and bold scientific exploration. He said at the 2016 National Conference on Science and Technology that 'scientists should be allowed to freely explore and test the bold hypotheses they put forward'.¹² In contrast, nearly two weeks before he addressed this Conference, Xi attended a symposium to discuss philosophy and social sciences in China. Instead of encouraging free, bold exploration, Xi called for developing a system of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics that incorporates the country's socialist practices. He urged efforts to 'care for, foster and make full use of' scholars in philosophy and social science fields and make them 'advocates of advanced thinking, trailblazers of academic research, guides of social ethos and staunch supporters of Party governance'. In particular, he called on party officials to 'spot, foster and assemble' a group of theoreticians well versed in Marxist theories and Chinese and Western cultures and to take initiatives to befriend scholars in the social science fields.¹³

While the Double World-Class Project has addressed some of the major concerns voiced by education experts, such as fixed membership, lack of transparent and merit-based selection and lack of competition among participating universities, it has largely ignored some other major concerns. Many education experts have stressed university autonomy as essential for building world-class universities. They criticize the 985 Project for having been weak in this regard. Cheng (2011: 28) pointed out that the 'direct result of this government-led approach' is that 'the MOE's power and control over institutions of higher education has actually increased, which is not conducive to the universities' autonomy over their own management and development'. Noting that 'due to the current increase in government-driven, top-down "projects", universities must cater to the will of the government to obtain resources', Yan (2011: 65) proposed that, 'to ensure the relative autonomy of universities and free inquiry for scholars, it is necessary to allocate public resources at the legislative level, legalize and standardize the exercise of power and behavior of the administrative authorities and clarify, as much as possible, the relationship and boundaries between universities and the government'. Not surprisingly, the Double World-Class Project is not keen to entertain ideas along these lines. In fact, the problem of micro-management seems to have become even more cumbersome. Gong Ke,

President of Nankai University from 2011 to January 2018, complained in a published interview that 'the government may have decentralized some power, but we did not feel it [...] Instead, government documents, meetings and inspections have increased in recent years, for instance, 50% more government documents (issued to us) in the first ten months of 2016 than in the whole year of 2015 and 40% more in 2015 than in 2014.'¹⁴ Overall, the participation of education experts in the making of the project was limited and their impacts were contingent on the CCP's agenda and ideological preferences.

Discussion and Conclusion

China's quest to have world-class universities started in the late 1990s with the 985 Project. To a lesser extent, the 211 Project launched in the mid-1990s was also part of this effort. After nearly two decades, China rolled out a new programme known as the Double World-Class Project to replace the 985 Project and the 211 Project. The making of the Double World-Class Project lasted from 2015 to 2017. After the announcement of the list of 42 'World-Class Universities' and another 95 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines' in September 2017, the new project entered the implementation stage.

This paper compares the making of the Double World-Class Project with that of the 985 Project to shed light on the extent and pattern of changes in China's policymaking. The 985 Project emerged out of university-government collaboration in a process that was first bottom up and then top down. The selection of universities underwent different phases without clearly preset standards and procedures. The expansion of the list of participating universities came to a halt by the end of the second phase (2004–2007) due to central government budgetary constraints. By comparison, the making of the Double World-Class Project is best described as a top-down process and a product of 'top-level design'. The State Council from the very beginning set the principles, rules and procedures to steer the making process. In response to some of the criticisms against the 985 Project, the State Council decided to set up an expert committee to oversee the selection process and introduce measures to enhance competition among participating universities.

What does this case study reveal about the evolution of policymaking in China? The prevailing literature has identified broad trends towards institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation in the Chinese context. If our primary purpose is to look for evidence in support of the prevailing literature, we can find ample material in this

study. Compared with the 985 Project, the Double World-Class Project is much more institutionalized, as evidenced in the preset guidelines, rules and procedures and the use of expert committee and third-party evaluations to rationalize the selection process. There is also evidence for the decentralization thesis. Provincial governments have taken initiatives to support universities within their jurisdiction. They will likely play an increasingly large role in co-funding the Double World-Class Project. The impact of provincial governments will become stronger at the implementation stage. Reportedly, Guangdong province has pledged over 10 billion yuan (US\$ 1.6 billion) to support its universities during the 13th Five-Year Period (2016–2020), while some provinces in western China can only commit 200 million yuan.¹⁵ With insufficient help from the central government, some top universities in the western region will have great difficulty keeping their highly sought-after professors, which in turn can negatively affect their standing in third-party evaluations. Finally, the Double World-Class Project also demonstrates evidence for the thesis of expanded participation. The role of education experts is much more visible and institutionalized in the Double World-Class Project than in the 985 Project.

Equally important, this case study shows the need to look beyond the thesis of institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation. In fact, some changes can be interpreted as counter-evidence. While the emphasis on 'top-level design' is in line with the institutionalization thesis, it runs counter to the decentralization thesis. Despite the trend of growing financial decentralization, provincial governments have limited influence on the making of the Double World-Class Project. The decision to select Xinjiang University, Yunnan University and Zhengzhou University for the list of 'World-Class Universities' is not a result of inter-provincial competition but propelled by the national needs for security and stability in its border province (in the case of Xinjiang University) and equitable development in the less developed central and western regions. The growing financial responsibility of provincial governments does not increase their power vis-à-vis the central government in the making of the Double World-Class Project. There are large gaps between fiscal decentralization and the decentralization of policymaking. The thesis of expanded participation is also insufficient or even misleading, given the lack of participation by non-governmental actors except invited educational experts.

The seemingly contradictory findings suggest that institutionalization, decentralization and participation are multifaceted concepts.

For each concept, different components or dimensions can change at varying paces. In a complex policymaking process, institutionalization, de-institutionalization and institutional innovation can co-exist. In the case of the Double World-Class Project, the first-time use of third-party evaluations to select universities is best viewed as an institutional innovation rather than institutionalization. This case study also suggests that institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation do not necessarily move in tandem, reinforcing each other. As discussed earlier, the 'top-level design' leads to greater institutionalization in the Double World-Class Project. However, the preset principles and rules limit the participation of provincial governments and non-governmental actors in the decision-making process.

More importantly, this case study shows that in the Chinese context there are limits to the highly celebrated institutionalization, decentralization and expanded participation. While normatively desirable, the characterization of China's policymaking as an evolution from 'hierarchical governance' to 'network governance', or from 'consultation' to 'deliberation', is a premature one, especially for multibillion, high-stakes policy initiatives such as the Double World-Class Project.

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NOTES

- 1 The 211 Project was launched in 1995 to uplift teaching, research and administration standards in about 100 higher education institutions and in certain key disciplines in the twenty-first century. The 985 Project, initiated in 1998, was more selective and also more generous in funding than the 211 Project.
- 2 The other three strategies are 'restructuring', 'merger' and 'cooperation'.
- 3 http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s271/201709/t20170921_314928.html (accessed 25 September 2017).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s271/201709/t20170921_314928.html (accessed

- 25 September 2017).
- 7 <http://edu.people.com.cn/GB/1055/3224824.html> (accessed 3 October 2017).
 - 8 http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1801624 (accessed 21 February 2018).
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 <http://edu.people.com.cn/GB/1055/3224824.html> (accessed 3 October 2017).
 - 11 http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s271/201709/t20170921_314928.html (accessed 25 September 2017).
 - 12 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-05/31/content_25542620.htm (accessed 31 May 2016).
 - 13 http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-05/17/c_1118882832.htm (accessed 31 May 2016).
 - 14 <http://www.lwinst.com/cjgjzk201713/4622.htm> (accessed 3 October 2017).
 - 15 <http://www.infzm.com/content/129344> (accessed 29 September 2017).

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TABLE 1. Number of Non-211 Project Universities on the list of 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines' by Province

Province	Region	Number of non-211 Project Universities on the list of 'Universities with World-Class Disciplines'
Beijing	eastern	8
Jiangsu	eastern	4
Shanghai	eastern	4
Sichuan	western	3
Tianjin	eastern	2
Zhejiang	eastern	2
Guangdong	eastern	1
Henan	central	1
Heilongjiang	north-eastern	0
Liaoning	north-eastern	0
Jilin	north-eastern	0
Shandong	eastern	0
Fujian	eastern	0
Hainan	eastern	0
Anhui	central	0
Hebei	central	0
Hubei	central	0
Hunan	central	0
Jiangxi	central	0
Chongqing	western	0
Gansu	western	0
Guangxi	western	0
Guizhou	western	0
Inner Mongolia	western	0
Ningxia	western	0
Qinghai	western	0
Shanxi	central	0
Tibet	western	0
Yunnan	western	0
Xinjiang	western	0
Total	---	25

Source: Author's compilation