

# ***SOLVITUR AMBULANDO***

## **From Policy Intent to Actions: Policy Innovation for the Higher Education Test and Admission System in China**

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Le, Weijing

aus

Shanghai

1. Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Axel Klein
2. Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Flemming Christiansen

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*To the best parents in the world*

*my mother Meiyang Huang (黄美英) and my father Jiaming Le (乐嘉铭)*

*To all my ancestors in Fuzhou and Ningbo, China*

*To the twenty-second century –*

*May the human mind remain mightier than artificial intelligence!*



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# Conventions

## Romanization

This thesis generally applies the *Pinyin Romanization* system. Several exceptions are made for established corporate names, which have been transliterated by the Wade-Giles or other systems (e.g., Tsinghua University, Peking University and Soochow University). Author names from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other overseas Chinese are also transliterated based on Wade-Giles that are already widely accepted (e.g., Ho Ping-ti). The issuers of Chinese policy documents are cited either using Chinese Pinyin (e.g., Guofa, Guobanfa, Hufufa) or using commonly accepted acronyms (e.g., MOE).

This thesis is written and revised using the spelling of standard American English. Citations are based on *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th Edition, using the preferred organizational templates of the *Journal of Political Economy*.

## Translations

The Chinese-English and German-English translations are mainly made by the author. All other translations will be sourced in footnotes.

## Notes on statistics

Two sets of quantitative statistics were gathered and applied in the thesis. One set of data was gathered with the help of my colleagues of Behavioral Economics, who had conducted experiments at the Nankai University in Tianjin in 2014-15. My colleagues kindly agreed to include several questions into their lab questionnaires and shared the responses with me.

Another set of statistical data derives from Prof. Chen Shuo's team at Fudan University. Prof. Chen generously shared his raw data about Chinese city mayors and Party Secretaries at various academic platforms (in WeChat, research blogs, and in his coffee shop "Working

Paper” near Fudan campus). The data set that I have applied here was downloaded from his post on the WeChat channel.

Both sets of data were initially gathered for the purpose of econometric research, but in terms of this study, I only approached the data with primitive methods using them as informational supplements to support my arguments.

## List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AMSCA	Assessment Mechanisms of Students' Comprehensive Abilities
AR	Autonomous Region
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCPCC	Chinese Communist Party Central Committee
CLGDR	Central Leading Group for Deepening Reform
CM	Causal Mechanism
CRI	China Radio International
DCSA	Department of College Students Affairs
DRC	Development Research Center
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
GER	Gross Enrollment Ratio
HSPT	High School Proficiency Tests
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
IESM	Institute of Economics System and Management National Development and Reform Commission
IT	Information Technology
MOE	Ministry of Education
NBER	National Bureau of Economic Research
NCDR	National Commission for Development and Reform
NCEDR	National Center for Education Development Research
NEEA	National Education Examinations Authority
NPC	National People's Congress
QS	Quacquarelli Symonds
SHMEC	Shanghai Municipal Education Commission
TFP	Total Factor Productivity
TVB	Television Broadcasts Limited (Hong Kong)
THE	Times Higher Education
WZB	Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (Research Center for Social Sciences Berlin)

ZJEB Zhejiang Education Bureau  
ZJFB Zhejiang Fabu (Zhejiang News Release)  
ZJNJ Zhongguo Jiaoyu Nianjian (China Education Yearbook)

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Themes of the study

*“It is sensitive!”*—this was the immediate reaction from my interviewees during fieldwork. Higher education admission policy is a sensitive issue in China. Conventional wisdom is that communist regimes tend to uphold egalitarianism as the core state ideology for maintaining the regime’s legitimacy and to treat meritocracy or elitism as antagonistic concepts. However, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) manages to deal with this sharp contradiction in the university selection system through a set of policy innovations. Shall university slots be equally allocated by socialist guidelines or by merit-based principles? With the changing dynamics of ideologies and the meritocratic needs of society, the conflicting policy values become the main reason for the radical changes in the Chinese university admission system in the past few decades. The primary concern of the study is to understand how China’s current policy innovation is designed and implemented to adjust the allocation system of study placement in accordance with its national goals as well as its diverse public interest.

University access is limited to those who are selected by designed rules embedded with political values. This fact determines the distinctive features of admission policy. It forms a part of the process that endeavors to impose values on the future and as part of the power struggle to control the future of education (Berkhout and Wielemans 1999:402). In a much broader context beyond China, university access is in fact sensitive, because it directly impacts the formation of education elites; and the rules and regulations of the selection deliberately construct the structural composition of the education elites. That is to say, from where in society do they originate and which groups in a given society obtain higher chances to enter the elite class of education? In the era of the knowledge economy, who gets educated, who gets ahead, and thus who achieves greater upward mobility. The bias of cultural reproduction is a deep-seated problem in every industrial economy. As a recent NBER study showed, American children whose parents are in the top one percent of income distribution are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy-Plus university compared to children from families in the bottom income quintile (Chetty, et al. 2017:1).

The Lee-Campbell research group contrasted profound changes of the structural composition of the education elites in four distinct periods over the last 150 years in China: (1) 1865—1905, education elites derived predominantly from the literati-officialdom classes and the successful test-takers of the civil service entrance examinations; (2) 1906—1952, offspring of merchant and expert families replaced the literati-officialdom and became the major force of education elites; (3) 1952—1993, workers and peasants, hence the proletariat, became the new education elites; and (4) 1994-2014, the origins of education elites diversified and fragmented, composed of offspring from worker-peasant families and privileged classes with greater capital possession (Liang 2017:52-53). In short, the changing composition of education elites reflected (and reflects today) the changing policy measures in adjusting the university admission system.

This dissertation looks at the central policy innovation for the higher education admission system in 2014, dealing with a single policy analysis. The chief goal is to understand *why* this particular policy innovation emerged and *how* implementation was shaped. It elucidates the policy innovation process by posing three questions: *Why* did the Chinese government engage with policy innovation for the admission system? *How* was it produced? And finally, *how* were local implementation activities shaped? These questions connect the major junctures in the policy process and aim to explain the causal process “from policy intent to action.” The next section presents the methodological approach to answer these questions and explain the design and operationalization of the process tracing method.

## **1.2 Methodological approach: Tracing the process “from policy intent to actions”**

The stages approach of the policy cycle is widely used as an analytical tool in the study of public policy. The thesis does not strictly divide the policy processes into the various policy stages from agenda-setting, to policy formulation, to policy implementation, onto policy evaluation, as these stages likely overlap in reality. Instead, the study applies the method of process tracing and investigates the process “from policy intent to actions.” The words (agenda-setting, formulation, implementation) are still used in the narrative, but they are not referring to a particular policy stage, but rather indicating a specific action taken by the actors.

The process of “from policy intent to actions” is enlightened by Ernest Alexander’s conceptualization of the “Policy Program Implementation Process,” which sees the transformation of intent to action as a continuously interactive process (Alexander 1985:411-412). The stages linking intention to action are distinguished arbitrarily and they incorporate the endogenous characteristics and variables of this continuous process itself (ibid.).

The process tracing method provides useful tools for a forensic investigation of a policy’s intent to its implementation. It treats the process “from policy intent to actions” as the unit of analysis (an instance of causality) and helps to generate theory-based variables that conceptualize the causal mechanisms leading to an outcome (the dependent variable). The thesis exemplifies a process tracing case study, which means that the selected cases are examples of the causal explanations for the process “from policy intent to actions” and the evidence from the cases shall be able to test the hypothesis that is built up based on existing theoretical assumptions.

### **1.2.1 Process tracing method and defining the process to be traced “from policy intent to actions”**

Process tracing attempts to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable (George and Bennett 2005:206). The method goes beyond the identifying correlations and association between two variables. It furthermore investigates the unfolding trajectories of changes taking place in selected cases and opens up the black box between a cause and an outcome (Beach and Pedersen Rasmus Brun 2013:34). Thus, the ambition is to illuminate the causal mechanisms that explain why and how independent (explanatory) variables produce outcomes. The research aims to explain the causation between policy intent and implementing actions. Therefore, the ultimate goal is the generation of valid causal inferences that formulate the causal mechanisms for an identifiable pattern of implemented actions.

Just as its name implies, the key to process tracing is to define clearly the process that is to be traced. The process “from policy intent to actions” is understood as an evolution of how a policy intent is formed and translated into actual policy content and how the content is transformed through implementing activities. The policy intent is the stimulus that directs attention to a goal, a problem or an issue (Alexander 1985:412) and it is closely related to the

concept of policy innovation that is triggered by crises, risks or defined problems. Policy actions include both actions and inactions of the implementers in the transformation of intent to actual practices. As mentioned earlier, the aim is not to put the actions into precise policy stages, rather the study focuses on the distinctive patterns of the actions that characterize the evolutionary process and explain the causality of the outcome.

The process entails various critical junctures that might influence the trajectories of the development. The definition of the process neither presumes the sequential development of the events, nor rules out the possibility of it. The empirical evidence shall give clear clues to this question so that determinist claims can be avoided.

### **1.2.2 Conceptualizing causal mechanism, theory-based variable specification and hypothesis**

The causal mechanisms within this proverbial “black box” are the subject of our inquiry. The focus in mechanism understandings of causality is the dynamic, interactive influence of causes upon outcomes, and in particular how causal forces are transmitted through a series of interlocking parts of such a mechanism to produce the outcome (Beach and Pedersen 2016:35). The first step of process tracing is to conceptualize the causal mechanism by using logical reasoning and existing theoretical and empirical literature to formulate a plausible causal mechanism whereby a cause produces an outcome (Beach and Pedersen 2016:322). In plain words, conceptualization of causal mechanisms involves specifying of variables and hypothesizing the causality.

Merilee Serrill Grindle’s implementation model (Grindle 1980) is chosen as a heuristic approach, as this theoretical framework draws a generic conceptual difference between policy content and policy context and offers a theoretical lens that can be applied in implementation studies of various policy fields. The theory also helps to structure the independent and dependent variables and map the causal chains in the implementation process. Grindle’s model is adjusted and developed to fulfill the analytical purposes of tracing the causality of implementation actions. The generation of the theoretical model and the specification and definition of the variables will be elaborated in Chapter 2. For the sake of readability, I will briefly present here how the variables are selected and how the hypothesis is generated based on the theory.

The independent variables derive from two categories: policy content and policy context. Policy content variables are those related to a specific policy field and concrete policy goals for implementation. The defined goals and strategic moves will frame envisioned changes for affected interest groups. The policy context variables derive from the existing institutional settings of the educational policymaking and implementation context which generate institutional constraints on the implementers.

George and Bennet argue that the careful characterization of the dependent variable and its variance is often one of the most important and lasting contributions to research (George and Bennett 2005:248). The implementation actions are viewed as the outcome, more precisely, the dependent variable of the causation. These two sets of factors are endogenous within the policymaking and implementation processes. The factors alone present more or less a static view of the plausible correlations toward the implementation actions. Through the process tracing methods, the evidence-based narratives can contribute to an explanation of the dynamic interplay of the factors that illustrates the causal mechanism for the outcome.

Referring to the content and context model and existing implementation theories, it is hypothesized that the interplay between content and context factors of the policy innovation for the higher education admission system enabled central control over the discretion space of the local implementing actors, whose behaviors were inhibited by the unstable and fragile discretion power in decision-making.

### **1.2.3 Case-based process tracing**

A “case” is an instance of a causal process playing out, linking a cause (or set of causes) with an outcome (Beach and Pedersen 2016:5). For the purpose of operationalization, the case selection basically defines the scope of a case; it determines the bounds of the causal inference (ibid.). For a theory, a population of cases exist. For a hypothesized causal mechanism, a sample of cases can be selected. Researchers aims to identify cases as causally similar to imply a certain degree of causal homogeneity and make the generalization of the causation plausible.

In practice, determining the number of cases and finalizing the cases are two major steps in designing case-based research. For one hypothesized causal mechanism (CM → outcome), one needs at least two cases to make general causal claims. The logic of calculation is based on

the mathematical probability calculation. In process tracing, the chief goal of the researchers is to investigate whether the causal mechanism and the outcome are present in a given case. As Table 1 suggests, if one can ascertain the presence of the hypothesized causal mechanism and outcome in both cases, it is already valid to upgrade the hypothesis to a causal claim, because the attempt to deny it is quite limited.

<b>Case</b>	<b>Causal Mechanism</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>1</b>	+	+
<b>2</b>	+	+

*Table 1: Two cases with hypothesized casual mechanism and outcome (by author)*

If one wants to deny a causal claim derived from a study of two valid cases, one would need at least three rival cases that provide the results as shown in table 2 below: in rival Case 1, the causal mechanism is not present, but the outcome is present. In rival Case 2, the causal mechanism is present, but the outcome is not present. In rival Case 3, both of them are not present. Yet, even though all three cases achieve the expected results, the attempt remains insufficient to kill completely the causal claim because the results only imply that there could be alternative causal explanations that are not necessarily in conflict with the one given.

<b>Case</b>	<b>Causal Mechanism</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>1</b>	-	+
<b>2</b>	+	-
<b>3</b>	-	-

*Table 2: Three rival cases with or without causal mechanism and outcome (by author)*

In line with this logic of case selection, two cases are selected for the research. Therefore, the causal process from “policy intent to actions” in Shanghai and Zhejiang are treated as two cases respectively. As shown in Chapter 1.2.2, the hypothesized causal mechanism is applied in both cases that the interplay between content factors and context factors of a policy generates a flexible discretion space that can be monitored and modified through central interventions. The unstable and fragile discretion power shapes distinctive patterns of implementation actions at the local level. The tracing of the two cases aims to identify and define the distinctive patterns of implemented actions (the outcome) and to test

whether the hypothesized causal mechanism is present in the course of implementation in Shanghai and Zhejiang.

#### **1.2.4 Operationalization of observable evidence and the smoking gun test**

The process tracing case study epitomizes a research method in which valid inferences from events outside the laboratory are made while at the same time retaining the goals of knowledge shared with laboratory science (Yin 2014: xvii). The laboratory methods enable the researcher to create idealized lab conditions (by controlling variables, data modelling, etc.) in order to gather experimentation data that show the causations on a quantitative level. Given the fact that a society or a polity cannot be an idealized lab, the process tracing method collects data based on observations. Furthermore, the researcher has the goal of making inferences that go beyond the observations collected (King, et al. 1994:8).

In process tracing, it is fundamental to draw causal inferences based on observable evidence. Qualitative scholars are often exposed to the criticism of being too descriptive in presenting field data. Historical explanations and storytelling are not considered valid social science research. Nevertheless, careful description is the basis of all research. The core point here is how researchers describe the observations in order to draw inferences in a dialectical way. As a tool for causal inference, process tracing focuses on the unfolding of events or situations over time (David 2011:824) and the description shall be constructed in a way that is able to characterize the key steps and changes in the process. In this sense, if chronological description or storytelling helps to make causal inferences for a hypothesis, then it is not just a historical narrative, but also a useful tool in making the dialectical inference clear.

The smoking gun test is the most eminent tool to test hypothesis-based inferences. Passing a smoking gun test implies a sufficient but not necessary criteria for accepting the causal inference, but its failure to pass does not necessarily reject it either. If a hypothesis passes, it substantially weakens rival hypotheses (David 2011:827). In plain words, the smoking gun test proves to what extent the inference is valid.

### **1.3 Overview of the research arguments and the structure of the thesis**

The current research project deals with a classical policy analysis. The policy under investigation is a top-level designed policy innovation for the higher education test and

admission policy in 2014 – “Opinions of the State Council on Deepening Reform to Examination and Admission System”. The major policy intent was to solve the problem of a talent shortage and a mismatch of human capital in the labor market. The policy changes aimed to fulfill six goals: 分类考试 (differentiation of test settings according to the different types of higher education institutions), 综合评价 (comprehensive and broad evaluation of students), 多元录取 (diversification of admission channels), 促进公平 (promotion of equality), 科学选才 (scientific selection of talents) and 监督有力 (effective supervision). Shanghai and Zhejiang were selected as the pilots to experiment with the new test and admission rules. With the changes of rules, high schools in both places were forced to act accordingly to adjust the teaching curriculum and organizational settings.

The thesis considers policy innovation as a trigger of institutional change in the existing admission system and aims to identify how the intent was translated, interpreted, and eventually put into practice. The major task is to identify the causality of the behavioral patterns in the implementation process. The core arguments of the study are that interplay of the policy content and context factors constructs an unstable discretion space that is deliberately monitored and can be modified at any time by the higher levels. The constrained discretion space leads to tactical implementation of the admission policy innovation at the local level.

Chapter 2 establishes the conceptual foundation and the theoretical framework for a systematic analysis of the empirical data. Policy innovation, as the main theme of the research, is defined based on a fairly extensive literature review of English, German and Chinese sources. The conceptual understanding begins with an interdisciplinary approach by constructing innovation from within the broader academic debates in economics, sociology, and political science. The conceptual boundary of policy innovation is drawn due to its empirical applicability and theoretical compatibility, in particular, the thesis adds an extra angle of policy innovation in the Chinese political context, which indicates its prominent role in contemporary Chinese politics. To ensure a solid conceptual foundation for the policy analysis in later chapters, the neologism “top-level designed policy innovation” is coined to illustrate the changing dynamics in Chinese policymaking that undergoes a process of re-centralization. The theoretical framework is made based on a literature review and Grindle’s implementation model

that differentiates content and context factors. According to the process-tracing method, it further defines the variables and specifies the hypothesis of the research.

Chapter 3 explains the variable of policy type. Admission policy is illustrated by its distinctive functions of allocating higher education opportunities and guaranteeing upward mobility. The selection criteria, which were shifted by the new policy, generated great social and political debates over its accountability and legitimacy. I argue that the conflicting values between meritocracy and egalitarianism are the main causes for goal conflicts and policy swings for the admission system in China. The stratification of admission among the population imposed additional pressure on the central decision makers to adjust the admission rules to meet the needs of socially disadvantaged groups.

Chapter 4 answers the question of *how* policy innovation is produced. It elaborates on the crisis in the labor market, which was perceived by the central government as the most pressing problem. Moreover, the institutional setting of admission policymaking is exemplified by illustrating the different roles and responsibilities of the key actors. Extensive data from the fieldwork are provided in this chapter to structure the observational evidence of how the goals were set and how the policy alternatives were chosen.

Chapter 5 continues to trace the process from policy intent to action by analyzing the implemented behavior in Shanghai and Zhejiang. The elaboration is constructed by focusing on the context factors (Institutional constraints, steering instruments and available resources) that influence the implemented decisions. It ends up by identifying the causal mechanism of modification and compression of the discretion space that had produced the tactical policy implementation at the local level.

Chapter 6 concludes the investigation by summarizing the key research findings and making implications on the theoretical and methodological approaches in the thesis.



## 2 Theoretical framework and data collection

The first section of Chapter 2 introduces the key concepts and the definitions that are continuously applied in the theoretical and empirical discussions of this thesis. Following the conceptual definitions, sections two and three demonstrate how the analytical framework for educational policy is constructed based on three branches of literature. As previously introduced, I take Grindle's differentiation between policy content and policy context as a heuristic approach to structure the independent variables in the policy implementation process. The last section presents the process of fieldworks and the interview settings. An overview of the data set will be provided at the end of the chapter.

### 2.1 Concepts and clarifications

#### 2.1.1 Conceptualizing policy innovation in political science

Schumpeter was one of the first to employ the term “innovation” to theorize economic development through recombination of existing production factors (Schumpeter 2006). Since then, innovation has spread beyond its original use and become one of the most fascinating keywords for a range of disciplines — including political science<sup>1</sup>. Due to its popularity, the

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<sup>1</sup> An array of outstanding scholarly publications has contributed to the analysis of innovation in different political systems. A leading school of scholarship looks at policy innovations and their diffusion patterns in federal systems, where local states play the role of democratic laboratories for novel policy experimentation (McVoy 1940; Walker 1969; Gray 1973; Savage 1985; Berry and Berry 1994; Mintrom 2000; Karch 2007). The major goal of this scholarship is to identify the independent (explanatory) variables that promote policy innovation and increase the speed of diffusion among states. In different policy fields, the identified variables might have distinctive influence on the result of innovation diffusion (e.g., economic prosperity is not always positively correlated with the growth of innovation). Both qualitative and quantitative methods are applied to trace the causality of policy innovations and their regional spread. Berry and Berry (1990) generates the method of *Event History Analysis*, which strongly relies on quantitative regressions to test the significance of such correlations. By doing so, a set of independent variables are shown to be associated with the propensity of innovation diffusion among the states. Many Chinese scholars joined this stream of theoretical discussions and tested the applicability with empirical data from China. Ma Liang's study, for example, demonstrates quantitatively that policy diffusion of policing microblogging among Chinese municipal governments is positively correlated with government size, internet penetration rate, regional diffusion effects, and upper-tier pressure (2013). Prof. Zhu Xufeng and Dr. Zhao Hui investigate the policy innovation of “urban subsistence allowance (城市低保制度)” and its diffusion patterns among over 200 Chinese cities from 1993 to 1999. They apply the method of *Event History Analysis* by Berry and Berry (1990) to trace the causality of policy adoption and to find out if city governments' decisions on policy adoption is a result of a tactical calculation and evaluation of local conditions, fiscal constraints, political pressure from the higher levels of government and/or competitive pressure from other city governments (2016: 95). Another useful theoretical approach is to see policy innovation through central-local relationships. For example, Strumpf contends that centralization leads to more policy innovations, if local governments are relatively homogenous and large in number (2002). All these scholarly publications provide useful theoretical lenses to understand the creation and adoption of policy innovations. However, the implementation process remains a research gap in the wider discussions of policy innovation.

concept has undergone an unavoidable inflation of meaning. Politicians tend to use innovation as a magic remedy to all problems, therefore, the meaning of innovation is expanding in an arbitrary way. For researchers of social sciences, this is in fact an academic challenge as the *Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung* terms it “overloaded signifier” (WZB 2010).

For a clarification of the research subject, the thesis refers to the definition of policy innovation by Heberer and Göbel: “policy innovations [...] entails the development of new ideas or concepts and the conversion of these ideas into new policies or policy instruments”(Göbel and Heberer 2017:286). To delineate the conceptual boundary of policy innovations, I underline three key conceptual components of policy innovations: novelty, innovation trigger, and social impact.

**Novelty**, as the definition indicates, constitutes the key attribute of policy innovation. Here I emphasize the “relative newness” of a policy. Innovation differs fundamentally from invention; the latter means creating something new that has never existed before. Innovation is relatively new as a point of reference (*Bezugspunkt*<sup>2</sup>). It differs qualitatively from the existing routines and practices (Nice 1994:5). The introduction of it will require organized changes in the existing institutional settings, as it interrupts the normal functioning—or malfunctioning—of an ongoing system and introduced new dynamics into the relationships between elected and appointed officials, between various levels of governments, and between government and its citizens (Grindle 2007:145). The novelty will evoke debates, negotiations and lobbying practices among affected groups, whose consensus on how such changes shall be realized is vital for the outcome of policy change. Thus, it does not matter how old a policy is or how many times it has been used somewhere else. As long as it is new for the adopter, it is innovative (Walker 1969:881). Different adopters make different decisions and reach different outcomes, albeit copying the same policy from other places. As such, this thesis is more interested in the process of *how* these changes are realized in a given political context.

**Innovation trigger: Crisis, risk and problem definition.** The development of new ideas and practices are triggered by defined problems of the government. In the view of sociologists, economic and social crises are the main causes of innovation in modern societies

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<sup>2</sup> See: Grunow (2014): *Innovation in der öffentlichen Verwaltung*, p:217

that are transforming industrial modernity to reflexive modernization—a process encompassing both continuity and interruptions of the core principles and institutions of industrial modernity (Beck 1996:44-45). Innovation is a means to survive on the path of transition towards a post-industrial modernity without a systematic alteration of long-held institutions (Zapf 1995). At the micro-level, each policy innovation offers a solution to a particular risk (Zapf 1989:178).

The government plays an active role in selecting a risk and defining it as a problem. Governmental conception of a risk is a result of internal attribution of possible harm (Luhmann 1996:5-6). A risk remains a risk until it is defined by the government as a problem. The possible harm of a risk must have been perceived and envisioned by decision makers in concrete terms, and it will then be defined as a policy problem, when the decision makers believe that they should do something about it (Kingdon 2003:109-110).

**Social impact.** As previously indicated, policy innovations will introduce new dynamics and stimulate changes in the existing institutional arrangements. The expectation is that these changes will generate sustainable effect on society. As Polsby put it, “innovations have institutional or societal effects that are in a sense lasting (Polsby 1984:8)”. There are scholarly echoes in a similar vein, “imitation, diffusion and institutionalization of policy innovations are considered as collective social output that exert sustainable influences on society (Howaldt 2010:55)”. However, there is no agreement on the evaluation criteria for sustainable effects and similarly, successful or failed innovations also lack a proper benchmark for the assessment. Of course, effective policy innovations are worth learning and copying. Yet they might be less effective at other places, where the existing structures and institutions work against the novelty. It is not wise to take the replication of policy innovation as evidence of its successfulness. Instead, the diffusion or imitation can be viewed as a fact of its social impact, i.e. the learning effect for other localities. Social impact is conceptualized in the accumulative sense and its aggregate decides the quality of social development. In the long run, old problems appear in new forms that demand new solutions. Every policy innovation will be old sooner or later and turn into the *Bezugspunkt* (benchmark) for the next policy innovation.

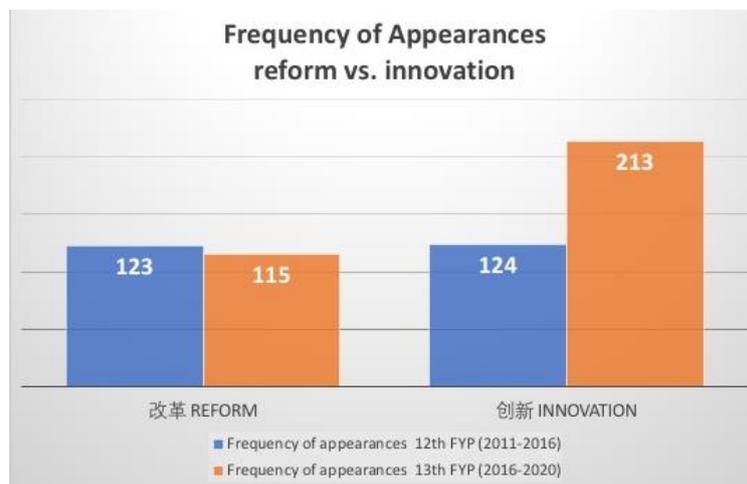
### **2.1.2 Policy innovation in China’s reform-context**

Policy innovation in China is to be understood in the broader picture of incremental political reform (Yu 2000; Yu 2011a), which entails a holistic vision of the overarching political ideals,

developmental goals and governance strategies of the country. The gradualist approach of China's reform relies on stability—it does not imply a radical system transformation, but rather the incremental attempts to optimize the governance structure and ability in order to eliminate corruption, ensure party legitimacy, and manage social problems (Le 2017:37). The Chinese intellectuals as well as the political leadership agree that the objective of political reform (政治体制改革) is “democracy” in the sense of rule of law, a high degree of participation and sound institutional checks and balances, [...] political reform is to establish accountability, transparency, reliability and trust among the people (Heberer and Schubert 2006:19). This understanding differs from the Western perspective of political reform that targets structural changes and the redistribution of power. The Chinese party-state has continuously emphasized the eminent role of political reform, but it by no means indicates a systematic transformation of the current political structure. Rather, it encourages the optimization of the ability to govern (Yu 2011b:3). To put it simply, the one-party system must by all means be maintained. In this context of political reform, innovation is thus treated as a means to fulfill the reform agenda – every policy innovation is an attempt to solve particular problems and the aggregates of all policy innovations constitute the collective reform outcome.

Innovation has become key to the political discourse in China that alters over time. At different junctures, the CCP tends to employ specific terms to incorporate the core party ideologies and holistic principles that should be referenced for all aspects of economic and social life. **Revolution** was the spiritual and political keyword during the battles against Japanese invaders and during the civil war against the nationalists. Throughout the first years of the People's Republic, revolution continued to be the ideological keyword for regime consolidation and class struggle against the capitalist counterrevolutionaries. Its use culminated in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76). It was replaced by the term **reform** at the Third Plenary Session of the Fourteenth CCP Party Committee in 1978, when the country declared its open-door policy and signaled clearly the will of ideological change and its intention to integrate back into the global community. Reform is considered the key to the economic miracle and its use is still prevailing in contemporary Chinese politics. In comparison, **innovation** joins the family of political keywords rather inconspicuously, despite the fact that it is widely used. In the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011-16) innovation appears 124 times, exceeding the term “reform” that occurs for 123 times (see Graph 1 below). For the first time

since the economic opening-up, a new term becomes the main theme of the development. When the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan was released in 2016, the appearance of innovation in the document had risen to 213 times, whereas the occurrence of reform reduced from 123 to 115 times (See also the illustration in Graph 1). However, this by no means implies the decreasing role of reform in Chinese political development, but, rather adds new explanatory indicators for gradualist reform in China (Le 2017:38). As mentioned previously, policy innovation is a means to realize the reform agenda and its conceptualization cannot be strictly separated from the reform context. They are definitively not two parallel concepts in competition, rather two interconnected political keywords constructing the leadership principles that determine the direction of China’s political and social development. As Prof. Yu Keping, one of the top 100 global thinkers (Pavgi 2011), concisely declared: “*We do not like revolution, but we do like reform. Now innovation becomes a new keyword.*”<sup>3</sup>



Graph 1: Frequency of appearances reform vs. innovation

### 2.1.3 From policy innovation imperative to top-level designed policy innovation

Ever since innovation prominently appeared on the political scene, its practices have been constantly changing in China. It is in line with the definition in earlier sections: policy innovation needs to be conceptualized as being in a state of flux; every new policy will sooner or later become old and turn into a new reference point for the next policy innovation. The key

<sup>3</sup> The citation originates from Prof. Yu’s speech at the University of Duisburg-Essen on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2012. The title of his talk was “Social Innovations in China”. The event information can be found: [https://www.uni-due.de/in-east\\_former\\_website/1/news/einzelansicht/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=273&cHash=e319b902b179cfe9fee52c00bda9fb0a](https://www.uni-due.de/in-east_former_website/1/news/einzelansicht/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=273&cHash=e319b902b179cfe9fee52c00bda9fb0a)

point here is that the central leadership is conscious of the indispensable necessity of being innovative.<sup>4</sup> It constantly navigates the changing political environment. The central government intends to manage a flexible governance system that can stimulate policy innovations, no matter how they are produced or from where they originate. Thus, the scholarly attempt to judge the top-down or bottom-up path of policy innovation is not very important because this approach already reveals an intention to confirm a static or fixed innovation pattern, whereby flux is the only constant. To quote the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: “The only thing that is constant in life is change.” Therefore, more scholarly attention shall be put on *how* the CCP designs and manages such a flexible governance system.

In Vivienne Shue and Patricia Thornton’s edited volume *To Govern China: Evolving Practices of Power*, they propose a more open-ended, fluid approach that privileges nimbleness, mutability, and an openness to institutional invention and procedural change, both proactive and reactive (Shue and Thornton 2017:22). Heberer and Göbel’s contribution in this volume illustrates how the CCP applies a strategy to impose a so-called “policy innovation imperative” on the local governors. These techniques represent a combination of the setting and the enforcement of rules and stimulations of “technologies of the self” that instill a personal “will to improve” of the local officials—both extrinsically and intrinsically the local cadres are motivated to come up with innovative solutions to local difficulties (Göbel and Heberer 2017:287-288).

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the official documents that repeatedly produce the key melody (主旋律) for policy innovations, the central leaders also echo the rhetoric at meetings, speeches and various public events. In order to justify and promote policy innovations, the political speechwriters of the central leadership have been digging into the ancient classics to make an even more plausible and convincing imperative for innovations, which is supposed to belong to the nature of Chinese political culture. In the New Year’s Address of 2017, President Xi quoted the ancient philosopher Wang Fuzhi: “the world moves on in a never-ending process, with the new replacing the old (新故相推, 日生不滞).” And innovation is considered as the engine of social development which leads the Chinese to realize the great “Chinese dream”. In the following year, President Xi again stressed the nature of constant change and the important role of innovation by quoting: “Fortune favors the diligent, and times are changing fast 天道酬勤, 日新月异”. On 11 April 2018, Xi made the keynote address at the BoAo Forum for Asia and he put policy innovations into a globalized context: Whoever resists reforms, refuses innovations, he will be left behind by the Zeitgeist and relegated to the dustbin of history (谁排斥变革, 谁拒绝创新, 谁就会落后于时代, 谁就会被历史淘汰).”

Indeed, the strategy had worked; the Chinese local governments had been proactively engaged in policy innovations for a while, but the innovational increases abruptly stopped around calendar year 2010. The local incentives for innovation suddenly vanished, too. Already since 2000, the China Center for Comparative Politics and Economics, an affiliated think-tank to the CCP Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, has been organizing the “Local Government Innovation Award” to encourage innovative governance practices at the local levels (including provincial, prefectural, county and township levels). The award takes place every two years and the organizer receives on average 300 applications for each competition. By 2016, over 2000 local innovation programs were evaluated by the expert committee, among which 149 were nominated and 70 were granted with the “Government Innovation Prize” (Renminwang 2015). Nevertheless, the number of local applications reached its peak in 2009 and then dropped continuously (Wu 2016). Professor Yu Keping, the initiator as well as the head of the award organization team, reveals that during the eighth award in 2015, the local governments were so reluctant to apply for the award and the organization team even needed to beg the local governors to take part in the competition (ibid.). It seems that the local incentives for policy innovations had been fading. On 18 July 2017, a tech-induced driven business of sleep capsules was forced to shut down for security reasons. A researcher from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) tweeted the news report in WeChat commenting: “the right way to innovate now is to do what the ‘central edict’ demands (奉旨创新才是正道).”<sup>5</sup> With the rise of the sharing economy, local governments in China are increasingly pressed by the “side-effects” of the dynamic business models, because the existing laws and rules are not sufficient to regulate the emerging market. However, the fact is that the localities, instead of engaging with creating new regulations and laws, chose to abruptly stop the sharing sleeping capsules.

Yu Jianxing argued that the sharp decrease of local policy innovations was mainly caused by local uncertainty and the fear of making mistakes, and without an endorsement from upper-level, local officials rarely engage with new public policy innovations<sup>6</sup>. In 2015, the

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<sup>5</sup> From author’s private WeChat sources.

<sup>6</sup> This argument derived from a lecture given by Prof. Yu Jianxing on 15 December 2016 in Duisburg, Germany. The title of his talk was “Mapping Local Governments Innovations in the Xi Era.” More detailed information about this lecture can be found: <https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/news.php?id=257>

“Local Government Innovation Award” moved completely to Peking University and the award title was even altered to “Best Practice of Chinese Local Government Innovation.” In an interview with *Nanfang Weekend* (南方周末), Yu Keping pointed out that the reasons for the local alienation from policy innovation were numerous, but the major problem lies in the ever-growing complexity of governance that challenges the managing capacity of the local governors. Therefore, their wavering attitude toward policy innovation is understandable (Wu 2016). Huang Weiping from the Shenzhen University joined the discussion and commented further: “it is true that reform can bring fruitful results, but at the same time it also bears high risks, including political, administrative and legal risks. Although the CCP rhetoric forges a sense of tolerance in case of mistakes and failures of innovative attempts, local governors remain the responsible person for the costs and consequences of failed innovations” (ibid.). By analyzing the campaign of “Mass Line Education and Practice Activities (群众路线教育实践活动)” initiated by Xi Jinping in 2013, Heberer and Göbel suggest that the campaign actually sent out a message that in the event mistakes are made, it is the individuals involved who should be held responsible: not society at large, nor the general party-state political system (Göbel and Heberer 2017:293). All the above observations manifestly demonstrate the enormous fear and mental stress imposed on the local governors, who consequentially have been alienating themselves from risky reform programs and treating policy innovations extremely cautiously.

In spite of the local alienation from innovational practices, empirical evidence also reveals that officials’ incentives have become perverse over time and the innovation programs are utilized as temporary showcases for career development. A study by Wu Jiannan et al. shows that about two thirds of local officials, who initiated policy innovations, have been either promoted or transferred to key positions in the government (Wu 2010:92). According to Heberer and Trappel, only leading officials who have been consecutively rated two times or more as “excellent” (优秀) shall be promoted to higher positions (Heberer and Trappel 2013:1053). In addition, innovative cadres are more likely to be evaluated as excellent. Therefore, the performance evaluation system literally gives ground for the emergence of distorted incentives of the local officials. Policy innovations seem to be sand castles that are washed away with each wave of new first-in-commands entering a locality (Göbel and Heberer 2017:304). This partly explains the unsustainability of innovative programs. Chen Xuelian

suggested a very interesting approach to assess the sustainability of policy innovations: if authorized staffing positions, or *bianzhi* (编制), were established in the course of innovation programs, it implied a certain degree of sustainability (Chen 2011b:107). This approach was actually a very useful measure to evaluate the durability of innovative programs in China because an insertion of additional positions into the *bianzhi* list already suggested long-term staffing. Both the creation and the removal of *bianzhi* positions were not easy jobs. They needed be authorized by the organizational departments, which defined concrete duties and functions of the positions, and decided the remuneration of staff. In Chen's study, only 22.7 percent of the local government innovations were accommodated by additional personnel for the implementation of the new programs (ibid.).

The unexpected side effects of the policy innovation imperative caught Beijing's attention, and in response to these changes in local officials' behavior, the central leadership started to adjust their governance strategy by proposing the so-called "top-level designed" policy innovations. The concept of "top-level design (顶层设计)" first appeared in the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year-Plan (NPC 2011) and was regarded as a new governance principle of the CCP (Xinhua 2011). It heralded changes in China's political landscape. While an official definition of the term was absent, diverse interpretations have emerged to interpret the central intention of proposing this new governance principle. The CCP mouthpiece Xinhua News Agency bracketed the new concept with "crossing the river by feeling the stones (摸着石头过河)" and claimed that the central initiation of "top-level design" was a sign of fundamental shift in the direction of China's reform (Xinhua 2011). The golden rules of pragmatism,<sup>7</sup> which had spurred policy experimentations and "learning by doing" over four decades, were to be adjusted to the changing institutional environment in China. Indeed, a near-consensus among the Chinese scholarship emerged that the current reform must be carried out through the principle of combining the method of "top-level design" and "crossing the river by feeling the stones" (Cai 2015; Yu 2014). This estimation was confirmed by President Xi Jinping, who claimed in

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<sup>7</sup> Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, institutional changes in China have been guided by a few golden rules created by "paramount leaders" such as Deng Xiaoping. These golden rules have proved to be efficient for the economic marketization in mainland China. They are for example, "crossing the river by feeling the stones (摸着石头过河)", "be it a black or white, a cat that catches mice is a good one (不管黑猫还是白猫, 抓住老鼠的就是好猫)." The essence of these rules is to experiment with new policy instruments and diffuse the successful ones nationwide, so that the economic transition can be realized efficiently.

the keynote speech at the Bo'ao Forum for Asia 2018 that “[...] we cross the river by feeling the stones, while strengthening the top-level planning. We constantly analyze new circumstances, solve new problems and accumulate experiences so that the Chinese people blaze a path of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Xinhua 2018b).” The call of “top-level design” seemingly implies a tendency of strengthening central power, and in fact, the power wrench between the central and the local levels in China has always been in a state of constant swing.

In 2017, the leading think-tank – “Institute of Economic System and Management” under the National Development and Reform Commission (IESM 国家发展和改革委员会经济体制与管理研究所) – conducted a profound research on the dysfunction of the current governing system in China. Six patterns of the local abuse of power are identified in the implementation of the reform policies:

- a) Arbitrary implementation by replacing central policy goals or creating countermeasures against the central intention
- b) Exaggerated scale of implementation by adding extra policy goals for local interests
- c) Selective policy implementation by garbling and falsifying central guidance
- d) Perfunctory policy implementation, which indicates superficial implementation by releasing some symbolic implementation plans that seemingly fulfill public interests but counteract with the policy goals in reality
- e) Partial policy implementation caused by misinterpretation of central policy goals
- f) Reluctant and delayed policy implementation caused by local cadres’ wavering attitudes toward changes (Zhang 2017).

As an affiliated research institute to NDRC, the IESM bluntly criticized the deficiencies and drawbacks of the current governance structure that substantially impede the policy implementation processes. The insufficient policymaking mechanism is considered as the root cause that impedes the policy implementation, as the central decision makers are not able to design effective policy instruments to shift the existing networks of interest groups and thus make it more difficult but less attractive for the localities to push forward the new reform programs (ibid.). This also partly accounts for the lack of interdepartmental coordination in the process of policy implementation. In this context, “top-level design” is thus proposed as the key

to establish a more elaborate and effective mechanism of policymaking at the central level. Accordingly, the top-level designed policy innovation is defined as “comprehensive reform guidance and reform plans which are produced, approved and enacted by the central government (Zhang 2017).”

Against this backdrop, the call for policy innovations under top-level design is to be understood as a strategic adjustment of the central leadership. From now on, the central level takes over the responsibility of policymaking and the local level is responsible for the implementation. The local officials must be creative enough to implement the policy innovations by matching central intention with local conditions. Nevertheless, this strategic move does not indicate a discard of the policy innovation imperative and haunting measures. The local officials are still haunted to be innovative, and one’s ability of innovativeness can also be evaluated by the innovative implementation that reconciles central requirements with the local reality.

#### **2.1.4 Policy and educational policy in China**

The bedrock of policy analysis is to understand what a policy means in a given political context. Generally speaking, “policy” refers to a variety of governmental documents (laws, regulations, statutes, ordinances, etc.) that represent the authoritative decisions for executive implementation. This section aims to clarify which official documents in China are included in the domain of policies and which are the main concern of this study.

Depending on the legislative system and the regime characteristics, the domain of the policy documents varies from country to country. In a federal system, policies are passed along in the form of laws by Congress and then implemented through a series of executive orders. In contrast, executive bodies in China not only implement but also make laws and regulations, which do not need to be passed by a legislative body before implementation. The highest legislative body (National People’s Congress, or NPC) can delegate legislative power to governmental units or departments to make laws or regulations. This is called departmental legislation (部门立法) (Zhou 2006:296). The feature of mixing legislative and executive settings in China’s authoritarian system reveals the ambiguous boundaries of power division and the interwoven relationships of state powers. Because multiple state agencies can make laws, their positions in the power hierarchy produce correspondingly authoritative hierarchies

in law interpretation: Constitution > basic laws > administrative statutes > local statutes > departmental regulations (NPC 2015: Article 87-88).

I delineate the functions and the general procedures of lawmaking in Table 3 below. It is evident that the legislative approval of the NPC becomes an indicator that demarcates the laws into two subsets: Constitution and the basic laws as one subset that are made and passed by the legislative body (NPC, or its standing committee) and the remaining laws as another subset. The administrative statutes (行政法规), local statutes (地方性法规) and ministerial and departmental regulations (部门规章) are made by the respective state authorities without an additional legislative approval of the NPC. The major function of these laws, as listed in the table, is to delineate the legislative decisions and individual provisions of the basic laws and to offer supplementary explanations for the implementation arrangements for specific issues (NPC 2015: Article 65, 73, 82). In more concrete terms, local statutes can be made to assist the implementation procedures according to local conditions, whereas departmental regulations are made to establish administrative rules and organizational arrangements in order to standardize bureaucratic action. The administrative statutes and local statutes are produced in unified formats stated in the “Ordinance on Drafting and Formulating Rules of Administrative Statutes 行政法规制定程序条例” (Guoling 2001b No. 321), whereas the ministerial and departmental regulations are produced uniformly according to “Ordinance on Drafting and Formulating Rules of Ministerial and Departmental Regulations (规章制定程序条例)” (Guoling 2001a No. 322). The Legislative Affairs Office (法制办公室) of the respective state authorities (State Council, local level governments, ministries, and commissions) is responsible for the statutory interpretation of the laws (Guofa 2013 No. 16: Article 17).

Although the laws are all legally binding, their scope of the legal effects depends on the authoritative position of the individual law makers within the state hierarchy. Theoretically, laws made by lower-level authorities would not contradict those made by higher levels. If the laws are not promulgated by the NPC or its standing committee, the supervisory power falls under the respective law makers (i.e., various state authorities). The consequences of failed implementation vary case-by-case, as they are individually decided by state units such as the State Council, the ministries, or commissions. For instance, if the MOE issues a departmental regulation, the binding effects apply only to MOE’s subordinates and affiliated parties, with

supervisory power also falling under MOE’s jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the MOE could theoretically take no judiciary measures against violators, as it is not a judiciary unit and its authoritative power only rests with administrative action. So, what the MOE can do is to release another departmental document to announce its decisions on penalties or countermeasures to improve the implementation. If the penalties are not in monetary terms, the MOE again needs to supervise the affected groups to correct or to improve as intended (normally called 整改/整顿 in Standard Mandarin, or rectification/reorganization).

<b>Authoritative Hierarchical of Laws</b>	<b>Functions</b>	<b>Made by / Passed by</b>
<b>Constitution</b> 宪法	Supreme law – setting political foundation, national frame of government, rights and responsibilities of the people	NPC / NPC
<b>Basic Laws</b> 基本法律	Laws regarding civil affairs, criminal affairs, organization of governmental units and other related areas as listed in Article 8 of the Legislation Law	NPC or its Standing Committee / NPC or its Standing Committee (signed by the President for official release)
<b>Administrative statutes</b> 行政法规	To concretize and supplement the basic laws for the implementation	State Council / Executive Meeting of the State Council (signed by the Premier for official release)
<b>Local statutes</b> 地方性法规	To concretize and supplement basic laws, administrative statutes according to local conditions for the local implementation / to make local laws that respond to local affairs	Provincial level governments and prefectural governments / respective People’s Congress at local level
<b>Ministerial and Departmental Regulations</b>	Can only be made based on the existing basic laws and administrative statutes to set up internal regulations	Ministries, commissions, People’s Bank of China, Auditor’s Office and other

部门规章	and administrative procedures of individual ministries or departments	affiliated organizations of the State Council / at respective departmental executive meeting
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*Table 3: Functions and procedures of law making in China (by author)*

In the Chinese context, another source of official documents belongs to the policy domain. They are produced through the executive line of state powers and constitute a large body of written documents that are diverse in form and function. German sociologist and philosopher Max Weber posed that modern officialdom relies on

[...] written documents (the ‘files’), which are preserved in their original or draft form, and upon a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials working in an agency along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files makes up a bureau (Weber 1978:957).

In China, such official documents are used to provide implementation guidance and instructions to lower levels and are also to announce authoritative policy goals and reform plans without legislative approval.

To be clear, although these documents are not legally binding per se, they can by no means be ignored in the policy implementation. In most cases, they play a dominant role in realizing top-down policy implementation in China’s bureaucratic hierarchy and are official instructions and guidelines to lower level bureaucratic organizations and affected stakeholders to implement higher level decisions in a specifically designed manner. Given the nature of the party-state system, CCP organizations also release such official documents for policy implementation. Sometimes, the CCP Central Committee releases documents jointly with the State Council. Interwoven in an extended state structure with both executive units and party organizations, these documents are transferred up, down, and sideways to convey information, ideas, and orders ensuring the operational practices of a functioning state machine.

In order to standardize how these documents would be formulated, transferred, and archived, the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council jointly released the document titled “Regulations on the Handling of Official Documents by Party and Government Organs (党政机关公文处理条例)” in 2012 (Zhongbanfa

2012). As defined in the regulations, fifteen types of official documents<sup>8</sup> are commonly used by governmental organizations for distinct purposes. As indicated above, these documents are not legally binding, but they can be made authoritative to their recipients via sundry political instruments such as signed contracts of responsibility between higher and lower governments and the cadre evaluation system (Heberer and Trappel 2013). Thus, one should emphasize the implicit attributes of these official documents—namely the policy issuers and the policy approvers—generating either stronger or weaker binding effects on lower levels.

Chinese scholars propose the concept of “authority of a policy” (政策的权威) that enables government organizations to impose mandatory duties and responsibilities on lower levels and affected social groups that supposed to submit themselves to these policy obligations (Tu 2012:49). As a typical feature of an authoritarian system, therefore, policy issuers and approvers’ bureaucratic position in the hierarchical system impacts how local implementers perceive the significance of the binding effects of the imposed obligations.

The tacit rule is *the higher the policy issuers and approvers are located in the bureaucratic hierarchy, the stronger the binding effects of the policy perceived by the local implementers*. It also partly explains how the local policy implementers measure the significance of a policy, to which extent they will take their job seriously, and how much effort they will be willing to invest into the job. Here, I aim to emphasize and clarify the role of the

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<sup>8</sup> The fifteen types of documents are: 1) Resolutions (决议), which is used to release key decisions agreed at official meetings. 2). Decisions (决定), which is used to announce strategic plans for important issues, to reward governmental institutions or individuals, to revise or revoke decisions made by lower-level institutions. 3). Ordinance / Statutes (命令 (令)), which is used for the promulgation of the administrative rules and regulations, for the announcement of coercive measures on key issues, for the approval of rewarding and promoting governmental units or individuals. 4). Gazettes (公报), which is used for the announcement of important decisions or issues. 5). Declarations (公告), which is used to declare key issues or legal affairs both domestically and internationally. 6). Notices/Bulletins (通告), which is used to inform certain group of people of important issues. 7). Opinions (意见), which is used to announce official solutions to key problems. 8). Notices / Memos (通知), which is used to forward information and key decisions to the lower level organizations. 9). Circulars (通报), which is used to announce the decisions of honoring or criticizing individuals and to circulate key issues. 10). Reports (报告), which is used by the lower-level organizations to report their working procedures and to reply the inquires to the higher-level organizations. 11). Appeals (请示), which is used by the lower-level organizations to ask for instructions or approval from the higher-level institutions. 12). Rejoinders (批复), which is used to approve or disapprove the requests or appeals from the lower-level institutions. 13). Bills (议案), which should be proposed to the National People’s Congress or its Standing Committee for legislative deliberation. 14). Letter (函), which is used for day-to-day communications between governmental institutions that are not affiliated or subordinated to each other. 15). Protocol (纪要), which is used as an official written record for important meetings.

policy issuers that is rarely discussed in the existing literature of policy studies in authoritarian systems.

This study is concerned with the policy innovations for higher education testing and university admissions, which was jointly issued by the State Council and the MOE. As it will be elaborated in Chapter 4, policymaking resulted in a final approval by the CCP Standing Committee, which imposed the strongest authoritative effects on the local implementers. With the exception of central policy, the research also refers to a set of administrative statutes, ministerial and departmental regulations, and provincial-level policy documents to exemplify the implementation processes of policy innovation. In the next section, I present the theoretical framework for this investigation while simultaneously laying out its analytical structure.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework, variable specification and hypothesis**

American sociologist Charles Tilly once claimed that regularities in political life are very broad, indeed trans-historical, but do not operate in the form of recurrent structures and processes on a large scale. They consist of recurrent causes that, under different circumstance and sequences, compound into highly variable but nonetheless explicable effects (Tilly 1995:1601). Enlightened by Tilly's argument, the development of the theoretical framework does not aim at an invariant formula to explain the overall implementation phenomena in China. Instead, it recognizes the high variation in individual implementation processes and tries to provide a theoretical foundation that is able to identify the recurring causes and to account systematically for the variation in the process.

To generate the framework, I mainly draw attention to three bodies of literature:

- (1) the policy implementation in China;
- (2) implementation theory; and
- (3) organizational behavior

For a solid foundation of the analysis, the following sections will contribute to an elaboration of the three approaches by illuminating their individual strengths in answering my research questions. All approaches provide distinctive perspectives of analysis and I will try to combine useful concepts to construct a theoretical framework that best suits the analysis of this project.

The concepts captures the realities that enter into powerful and fruitful causal sentences (Stinchcombe 1978:115).

It needs to be emphasized that this thesis focuses on the behavior of actors and *how* policy outcomes are determined. Yet, the evaluation of policy itself and its normative “success” or “failure” does not fall within the remit of this study. As a matter of fact, the framework provides a new theoretical foundation to explain the causation of implemented behavior in authoritarian China. The unfolding causal processes might vary widely among different instances.

### **2.2.1 Policy implementation and central-local relations in China**

In previous works, policy implementation in China has been widely investigated from the central-local perspective. As the principal-agent theories suggest, interest conflicts and asymmetrical information flows are inherent difficulties embedded in principal-agent relationships (Eisenhardt 1989). Central-local relationships in China resemble a principal-agent relationship that is characterized by the nature of diverse interests alongside each governmental level, information asymmetry, formal and informal communication channels and departmental conflicts.

The first school of the implementation scholarship presents a strong focus on misbehaviors of local cadres that lead to implementation gaps or policy failures. Empirical inquiries have shown diverse institutional measures taken by the central government to prevent local distortions and to stimulate behaviors conducive to central goals. In general, these institutional measures can be put into two categories: (1) the control and monitoring instruments which coercively make the implementors act like truly principled agents; (2) the incentive structures, which instill intrinsic motivation and ably encourage loyal implementation. So, the scholarly findings mainly explain under what circumstances do these control mechanisms fail and why the implementors are able to shirk and sabotage central plan.

Li Lianjiang and Kevin O’Brien demonstrated that rural cadres are selective in policy implementation and they prefer to implement policies, whose outcome can be assessed in quantified terms, e.g. collection of taxes and birth control (O’Brien and Li 1999). The top-down control of the cadre responsibility system creates a link between performance and penalties (or

rewards) that aims to control the implementation from the top-level down to the village level, however, the system fails when the higher level is not able to quantify the policy targets, i.e. it encourages selective policy implementation, because once the binding targets are fulfilled and acknowledged through quantitative evaluations, the responsible cadres will receive positive credits in the annual appraisal and be more likely to be promoted to higher or better positions (ibid. 171-174). Göbel complemented O'Brien and Li's findings by demonstrating three concrete steering instruments: the hierarchical structure of bureaucratic settings, competition among the local agents, and the networks between principals and agents (Göbel 2011:58-60). He further interpreted the strengths and weaknesses of each steering instrument, revealing that under the application of the same instruments, the local implementers reacted quite differently due to local conditions and political calculations. They can be not only pioneers, but also resisters as well as bandwagoners, explaining the growth of regional inequality (ibid.: 61). Except the central clutch on personnel management, the incentive structure is viewed as another explaining factor for the implementation gap.

Ran argued that the perverse incentive structure set by the central authorities accounts for the implementation gap of environmental policies in China, as the central government provides more incentives for local government's poor or non-existent implementation of its environmental policies than for its full implementation (Ran 2013:34). Moral incentives may improve cadres' motivation for responsible implementation in order to polish political images, but these intangible rewards cannot be translated into real career advancement and monetary benefits. The scarcity of environmental budgets forces the local governments to sideline environmental policy implementation that is often in conflict with industrial policies for local revenue (ibid.).

What these studies have in common is a clear identification of implementation failure (the dependent variable), so that the search for the explanatory factors can make sense. The implementation outcome is seen as a result of the effectiveness of central control instruments and incentive mechanisms, whereas the studies' lack of theory-based criteria to evaluate the discretionary space at the local levels in fact as important as the central instruments in affecting local implementation activities.

Another Sinology school has shown growing competencies of central governance and increasing local initiations leading to effective policy implementation. These scholars highlight the unorthodox governance mode of China that has been extremely flexible and adaptive in generating innovative policy instruments to instill institutional changes in the rigid authoritarian system. Zhan argued that the unwavering power of central agenda-setting, the institutional advantageous position of the central government, and the shrewd bargaining strategies strengthened central control of implementing fiscal policies (Zhan 2009:445). Many developmental studies on China's economic miracle provide enlightening illustrations of the policy process that, despite mass inertia and tenacious resistance, contributed to the institutional innovations for the realization of market reform. Sebastian Heilmann proposed that China's successful marketization is a result of policy experimentation under hierarchy. That is to say, innovative local experimentation that is conducive to central policy priorities would be used for central policy refinement for future national implementation. This distinctive policy cycle explains how institutional changes have been managed through the bottom-up process of policy experimentation (Heilmann 2008). Nevertheless, Heilmann also acknowledges that local initiated pilots might be limited to economic policies that can create short-term interests such as economic growth and personal career development (*ibid.*). The framework explains a distinctive policy process unfolding in a specific time period, whose political and social institutions have been dramatically shifted in the last ten years. Nevertheless, Heilmann's study points to a core factor in the implementation study, namely the policy field and the type of policy. In a later publication, Heilmann and Melton again emphasized the role of the policy area for the outcome of policy implementation. In certain policy areas, policies might be effectively implemented, but in other policy realms, one finds persistent blockades or outright failures of plan-based coordination (Heilmann and Melton 2013:37). Anna Ahlers and Gunther Schubert demonstrated that local agents and implementers were able to create win-win situations for all parties—the central state, local bureaucracies, and the populace (*i.e.*, the local cadres seriously take care of the central guidelines and provide public goods to improve local conditions) (Ahlers and Schubert 2015:395). The study offers new insights into local implementation that incorporate the formation of strategic alliances and takes interests and needs of all parties into account to reach mutually accepted implementation decisions.

The two schools of implementation studies in China have informed the dynamic interactions between central and local levels in processes of policy implementation. As the investigated policy innovation is top-level designed, the research angle of central-local perspective shares important insights regarding central governance techniques and the institutional logic of local states. However, the aforementioned studies all begin with a clear identification of a success or a failure in the implementation that is treated as the dependent variable. In addition, it seems necessary to have a successful or failed policy implementation, so that the search for explanatory variables are possible. From another perspective, the definition of success and failure can be vague and often misleading for policy analysis. If one presumes that successful implementation is the full accomplishment of policy goals, then questions will follow: whether these goals can be evaluated by the same measures and to what extent do these goals fulfill public needs, in particular, if the policy goals are defined authoritatively by the central level.

Therefore, the thesis does not expect an absolute outcome of the policy implementation, as the process is rushing ahead continuously. Instead, the study looks at behavior at the local levels and aims to identify the behavioral patterns of the local implementers (the dependent variable).

### **2.2.2 Implementation theory and organizational behavior**

Implementation as a research topic was conceived during the Great Society Programs of the 1970s. Pressmann and Wildavsky's seminal work *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland* (Pressman 1973) induced an array of case studies on public policy implementation. The studies are split into the top-down and bottom-up varieties. Those of the top-down school primarily focus on the role of federal government in policy design and its capability in controlling the outcome (Bardach 1979; Derthick 1972; Mazmanian 1983; Murphy 1973; Van Meter 1975). The bottom-up school takes a backward-mapping approach to evaluate local commitments of street-level bureaucrats and emphasizes the explanatory factors evolving through implementation activities in multiple front-line organizations (Berman 1978; Weatherley and Lipsky 1977).

Both top-down and bottom-up studies account for intergovernmental relations and their effects on the implementation outcome by making a hidden assumption that the implementation

outcome is either a failure or a success. The case studies aim to establish a correlation between the identifiable factors (independent variables) and the outcome (the dependent variable). However, these factors (treated as independent variables) are just loosely coupled with the operational reality of a specific instance of policy implementation, depending on the policy field, the explanatory variables vary a great deal and fail to make general theoretical claims to explain phenomena. In O'Toole's extensive investigation of a hundred implementation studies, he counted over 300 variables in the field (O'Toole 1986:185-188). Some theorists have tried to make the pool of variables more structured and developed theoretical models to define explicitly the variables and subprocesses in the implementation (Berman and McLaughlin 1976; Van Meter 1975). These models are useful in identifying and explaining the correlations, but not sufficient enough to measure the causal effects on the implementation outcome.

Therefore, the current study combines both top-down and bottom-up approaches by adding the measure of discretion space at the local level. It assumes that the space of local discretion is constructed through both central control instruments and local coping mechanisms. As the study concerns the process "from policy intent to actions", an evaluation of local discretion space helps explain the causality of implementation decision-making.

Discretion space is fluid and it is bound to a particular policy which is to be implemented by an intended agency. As defined by Simon Hebert, the discretion is limited by policies determined near the top of the administrative hierarchy, as a primary function of organization is to enforce the conformity of the individual to norms laid down by the group, or by its authority-wielding members (Simon 1997:9). Therefore, in terms of implementation analysis, the intended implementing agency is to be viewed in a bureaucratic organization. The study treats the educational bureaucracy as the organizational unit. The local agency is situated in the organizational environment constructed by the institutional settings of the education sector. Those involved in the implementation process are not merely "organizational men" who mechanically follow orders from above; rather, they are socialized human beings with feelings, judgements, and interests. They bring their own cognitions, judgements, and interests into implementation process (Zhou 2010:54). Thus, organizational behaviors are the outcome of a complicated intermeshing of individual decision-making. One of the major problems of implementation literatures is the missing link between policy intent and actions. The jump from

goals to implementation outcomes aims to explain the dysfunction of the policy delivery system, but the identified factors actually reflect the nature of an organized anarchy that makes decisions without consistent and shared goals (Cohen, et al. 1972). For example, the “complexity of joint actions”, concluded by Pressmann and Wildavsky as the main cause for the policy failure in Oakland (1973), is actually common to complex organizational bureaucracies. It is thus a problem of the organization that is charged for implementation, but not the causal explanation that researchers are searching for. If factors as such would have been the causes for failed policy implementation, then every policy would be doomed to failure, because policy implementation relies on group activity of organized bureaucracy and it can hardly be accomplished by a single person. As soon as a task grows to the point where the efforts of several persons are required, it becomes necessary to develop processes for the application of organized effort to the group task (Simon 1997:7). The participants of the organization have considerable discretion and tend to carve out areas of discretion when orders from above conflict with other responsibilities and preferences on the job. They will find ways of doing things they want to do if they have any discretion at all, are not closely supervised, or if the penalties for acting contrary to administrative directives are not highly salient (Lipsky 1978:397).

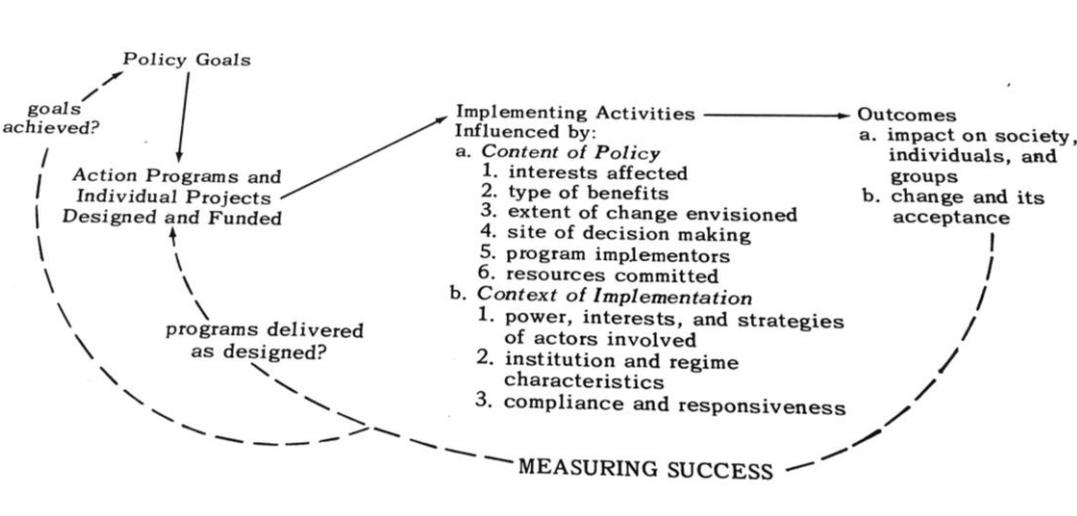
Therefore, this study goes one step back and looks at the behaviors of the policy participants. All behavior involves conscious or unconscious selection of particular actions out of all those which are physically possible to the actor and to those persons over whom he exercises influence and authority (ibid.: 3). How decisions for the selection of actions are made within an organization determines the result of implementation. The emphasis of implementation studies shall be laid on the behavioral logics of implementing actors.

### **2.2.3 Explaining the causal mechanism: Policy content and context model for implementation analysis**

Based on our literature review, the “policy content and context model” is developed to explain the causal mechanism of how a cause produces the certain pattern of implementation behaviors in China’s educational bureaucracy. The key concepts derived from the literature review mainly contribute to the variable specification and the hypothesis building.

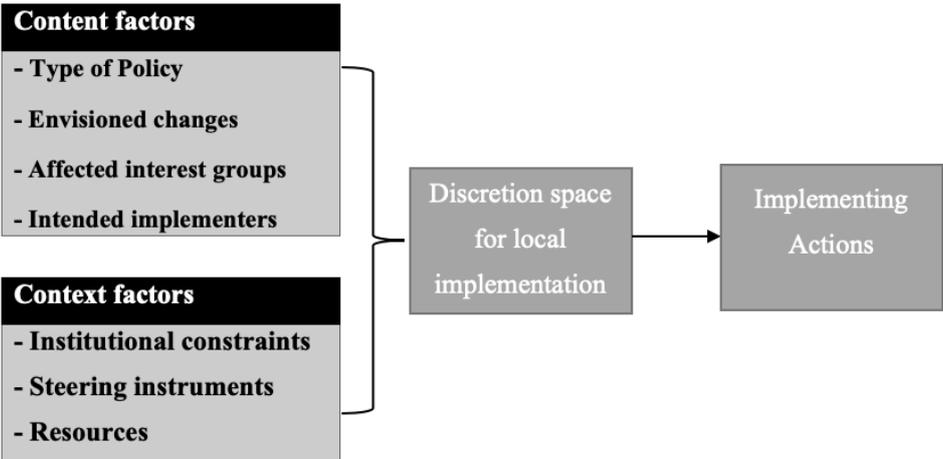
Third World governments tend to formulate broad, sweeping policies and governmental bureaucracies often lack the capacity for implementation (Smith 1973:197). Unlike in many Western nations, governmental policies seldom are the result of demands from and pressures by vested interests (Dye 1995:291) and a large portion of individual demands and even group demands, in developing nations reach the political system not before laws are passed, but rather at the enforcement stage (Scott 1969:1142). An investigation from “policy intent to actions” in China’s educational bureaucracy relies on a framework that combines the factors affecting both policymaking and implementation processes and establishes the relations of the factors to draw causal inferences. A separation of policy design and policy implementation is fatal for policy analysis (Pressman 1979:178).

The current study takes Grindle’s implementation model as a heuristic approach and put the variables in two categories: content and context factors (Grindle 1980:9-13). In Grindle’s model, the implementation process is defined as “ongoing process of decision-making by a variety of actors, the ultimate outcome of which is determined by the content of program being pursued and by the interaction of the decision makers within a given politico-administrative context (ibid. 5-6).” As the graph below illustrates, Grindle distinguishes between policies and action programs, and the individual programs or projects are designed according to broad policy goals and objectives. The model interprets implementation as a general process of administrative action and the quality of implementing activities decides the outcome of the overall implementation which is evaluated by measuring program outcomes against goals.



Graph 2: Grindle's model for implementation analysis

Starting from Grindle’s model, the study borrows the key analytical tool to separate the content and context factors and adapts the structure by inserting the measure of discretion space to evaluate the implementation actions (see the graph 3 below). The thesis differentiates policy intent from policy goals. It relates policy intent to the trigger of policy innovation, as defined in the beginning of this chapter. Policy intent concerns the actual crises and problems that press the government to take actions; policy goals are concrete targets that are designed and defined by the decision makers based on the expectation that the policy changes can be put into practices through administrative actions of involved implementers and interest groups.



Graph 3: Theoretical framework - content and context factors and the implementing actions (by author)

The differentiation between content and context factors of implementation is useful for the variable specification of this study. Based on the literature review of implementation studies in China, four factors (type of policy, envisioned changes, affected interest groups and intended implementers) are specified for the content domain and three factors (institutional constraints, steering instruments and resources) are specified for the context domain. In practice, a clear distinction between the content and the context of implementation is difficult to maintain; the thesis recognizes the overlapping and interconnectedness of the content and context factors and assumes the interplay of content and context factors jointly delineates the discretion space for the implementers.

**The content factors**

As previously noted, Heilmann and Melton have already raised attention on the policy field that determines the effectiveness of policy implementation. In a similar vein, Theodore Lowi has argued that the scope of power and the power structures in policymaking are determined by the type of policy (Lowi 1964:688). This observation can also be applied to the implementation process, as the functional differentiation of policies draws the boundaries of the implemented organizations and their scope of power in which a particular power structure within the policy are delineated. From a functional perspective, public policies can generally be categorized into three groups: redistribution, regulation and distribution (ibid.: 689). In practice, the functional differentiation can be narrower and more concrete. For example, it can point to a field of “educational policy” or a particular policy of “admission policy reform”. It depends on the research questions and design, whether the type of policy is defined by the broad functional field or a problem-related policy issue. The major task of the research is to discern the impact and/or expected impact of the type of policy on society (ibid.), which not only determines how the policy is made but also influences how it is interpreted and implemented.

The degree of change envisioned in the policy is another content factor that impacts the implementation activities (Grindle 1980: 9). The rural policies, as illustrated by Li and O’Brien, are only selectively implemented, but the fact is that even among the selected policies, the degrees of behavioral adaptations and grassroots cooperation can be quite different. Policies of tax collections, birth control and road constructions are all preferred for implementation as their goals can be quantified; these policies require distinctive degrees of changes for rural cadres and eventually influence their implementing logics in fundamentally different ways. For rural officials, projects for road constructions might be easier for implementation, as the improvement of infrastructure also benefits the villagers and greater support can be expected. In terms of birth control, however, the situation turns to the opposite. It is no longer a win-win scenario for the cadres and villagers. Therefore, it can already be envisioned that the implementation will incur strong resistance and incompliance. Surely, the implementers will also take technical feasibility and overall implementability of a policy into consideration, especially in the educational field, if a new technology for visualization is to be introduced in the classes, a chain of behavioral changes is required for the implementation. Whether the schools are rich enough to purchase the devices and how many extra technicians must be hired for the maintenance? These are all open questions for the implementers in the decision-making.

The third factor in the policy content domain is the affected interest groups. Every policy innovation has the intent to cause a change in the existing institutional environment. Moreover, the envisioned changes have different impact on the policy recipients. If a public policy aims to redistribute the school seats among the population, the change will directly affect the interests of the students and their families, the schoolteachers and educational bureaucrats. Every change in the system actually shifts the existing structures of interest distribution. The implementation process can thus be viewed as an attempt to reach another equilibrium of the distribution of beneficiaries among the affected interest groups.

The last content variable is the intended implementers, who are appointed or assigned to fulfill the implementation tasks and goals through organized administrative actions. Decisions made during policy formulation indicate who is to be charged with executing various programs and such decisions can affect how the policy is pursued (Grindle 1980: 10). Implementers from different bureaucratic agencies might have different incentives and motivations to complete the assigned jobs. As noted earlier, the incentive structures designed by the central government actually encourages non-implementation of environmental policies in China (Ran 2013). In some cases, the intended implementers do not have the capacity to reach the goals as stated in the policy document and choose to resist or delay the implementation, until more resources are promised. Therefore, the specification of implementers not only defines the site of implementation, where the bureaucratic actions are carried out, but also imply the institutional environment of the organization that will be elaborated in the next paragraph of content factors.

### **The context factors**

The context of implementation refers to the institutional environment that impose institutional impacts on the implementers and affected groups and constrain or incentivize certain patterns of behavior. The study understands institutions from the New Institutional perspective and acknowledges the significance of both formal and informal rules in forging institutional behaviors of the organizational decision-making. In the Chinese bureaucracy, there is a co-existence of bureaucratic impersonality and personalization of informal administrative ties, and as Zhou Xueguang argues, the formalization processes present great uncertainty and risks to local bureaucrats who care about their career advancement, and the personalization of

administrative ties is a main coping strategy by which bureaucrats respond to such environmental uncertainty (Zhou 2010:67). As defined by Douglass North, institutions are “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction (North 1990:3).” Established institutions ensure conformity of the collective actions. Behaviors that are not in compliance with the institutions will be punished and rule-based actions are rewarded in material or monetary terms. These are constraints imposed on the actors in the game. By institutionalizing the rules, the participants are not just informed of the ways how they should act and react, but they can make decisions of actions in advance by calculating and balancing a set of incentives, interests, potential rewards and punishments according to own needs. Therefore, the incentive structures of a particular game are also constituted by the established rules of the game. In terms of political actions, the differentiation of formal and informal institutions lies in the official codification and legitimation of the rules. Formal institutions are widely accepted and recognized in the society, as the formulation is officially legitimized by legislative or executive authority. In contrast, the informal institutions are loosely articulated and rely on the mutual acknowledgment. From this perspective, formal institutions are more solid and stable than informal ones, which can be abandoned as soon as the mutual agreements collapse; informal institutions remain powerful in political life, as it provides the base for the exchanges of information and interests. Decision-making can be done more precisely, if one knows how their counterparts are making decisions; the decisions can be made more deliberately, if the decision makers agree on some tacit rules to exchange interests, so that a win-win situation can be achieved.

The second factor from the context domain is the steering instruments that are devised by the higher-level decision makers to monitor and supervise the implementing activities of the subordinates. The steering instruments can be a byproduct of the hierarchical structure of the Chinese bureaucracy, which is vertically and horizontally fragmented in the distribution of power and responsibility. Moreover, different control measures will be created for different types of policies so that the principals can apply coercive or incentive measures to ensure the implementation quality. Especially for educational policies, the implementation is executed by a large number of individual decision makers dispersed throughout extensive geographic area but usually belonging to a single bureaucratic organization. Ultimately, each school director might be envisioned as an implementer (Grindle 1980: 9). Therefore, analyzing the process

from intent to actions shall imply the role of steering instruments in shaping implementing actions of various interest groups involved.

The last factor is the resources of the implementing organization. Grindle puts resources in the content domain of policy implementation because, by definition, most of the public policies deal with the allocation of committed resources. Admission policies differ slightly from other public policies that aim to distribute monetary funds or payments among the policy recipients. The admission policy can alter the rules and values in allocating university seats, but the realization of it require a complex package of resources of the individual implementing organization. Monetary resources constitute just a small part of the package. Infrastructure, personnel and technological resources may play a more decisive role in the implementation planning. The implementing actions reflect the organizational logics of utilizing existing resources and acquiring additional resources, which strongly influence the agility and flexibility of the organizational actions.

#### **2.2.4 Hypothesis-building**

Having introduced the analytical framework and specified the variables, this section aims to formulate a hypothesis of the causal mechanism. As elaborated in the theory, the content and context factors of innovation are interconnected, and the integral effects constitute the causal forces that produce the outcome.

It is hypothesized that the interplay between content factors and context factors of the policy innovation for higher education admission system enabled central control over the discretion space of decision-makers, whose behavior was inhibited by the unstable and fragile discretionary power in decision-making. The umbrella hypothesis can be further elaborated in relation to the individual factors and dissolved into sub-hypotheses.

The type of policy determines the social and political impact of the implementation, policy issues that shift the long-established interest structures of the society require more careful management of interest balancing and consensus building in the processes of policymaking and implementation. For sensitive policies, the decision makers need sufficient knowledge and information to calculate the potential risks and extended consequences in the long run. It is thus assumed that the type of policy has broadly drawn the boundaries of the discretion for the

involved actors in the implementation. The more sensitive the policy issue is, the smaller the discretion space is. The more complex the interest networks are, the smaller the discretion space is.

For the affected interest groups and intended implementers, the degree of envisioned changes varies widely based on individual judgements and needs. The complexity of networks among the actors might determine the potential conflicts or mutual interests in the execution of the policy changes. The discretion space of the implementers is actually increased by the degree of changes. The higher the degree of change is, the more alternatives will be available to choose to realize such change.

In the domain of context factors, institutional constraints and steering instruments are intentionally devised to compress the discretion of the implementers. As mentioned before, China's top-level designed policy innovation is an approach to strengthen the central control over the implementation of the reform policies. The constraints imposed on the implementers might be coercive measures or incentive-based institutions to cultivate the conformity of the implementation behaviors. In general, they all aim to take command of the implementation by top-down modification of the discretion space.

Available resources are a vital factor for the implementation. The more resources one possesses, the more choices and opportunities one can have and thus the larger the discretion power is.

## **2.3 Data collection and fieldwork**

This section introduces the process of data collection and the fieldwork organization. The study applies both qualitative and quantitative data for the explanation of the causal process from policy intent to implemented actions.

### **2.3.1 Fieldworks**

The empirical data were mainly collected during two separate trips to China to conduct fieldwork (December 2014 to January 2015 and August 2015 to February 2016, respectively). The total duration of both trips to China amount to eight months. Outside of interviews in China, I had the opportunity to interview several education officials, scholars and university principals

in Germany, who happened to visit or work at the Chinese General Embassy in Berlin, at the Confucian Institute Metropole Ruhr and at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany.

The interview appointments were partly arranged in advance, while many emerged through snowballing effects at the field sites. Therefore, most of the trips planning allowed relatively high flexibility and spontaneity. Depending on the location of interview partners, universities or high schools, the fieldworks were carried out in six provinces (or municipalities): Beijing, Shanghai, Zhejiang (Hangzhou and Yiwu), Jiangsu (Nanjing), Anhui (Ma'anshan) and Fujian (Xiamen). According to my research design, I selected Beijing, Shanghai, and Zhejiang Province as the major field sites. Some occasional visits in Nanjing, Ma'anshan, and Xiamen were organized to meet educational experts outside Beijing, but these interview chances had emerged only in the course of fieldwork.

Beijing is the political center for policymaking. The Ministry of Education (MOE) locates in the capital city and the majority of the policy experts involved in policymaking are professors and scholars at universities and research institutes in Beijing. Fieldwork in Beijing mainly fulfills the task of gathering data for the making of policy innovation and to gain insights of the emergence of policy intent. Based on an earlier literature review, I proactively contacted experts and MOE researchers and officials in advance. Most policy experts had generously shared the stories and views with me. It was fortunate that one MOE researcher, who was directly involved in the policy formulation, arranged an interview appointment with me. Through the participation of a joint workshop organized by the DFG research group Risk and East Asia, I was able to speak to an MOE official who is responsible for the higher education affairs.

The field trips in Zhejiang and Shanghai served to observe the actual implementation in the high schools. Thanks to the governmental outsourcing of bureaucrat training, I managed to join a training group of education bureaucrats and teachers from Shaanxi Province. They travelled to Shanghai and Zhejiang to learn about how policy innovations can be implemented in the home province. As the policy innovation must be implemented in 2020 nationwide, bureaucrats from other provinces started quite early to learn from the others. The training comprised of lectures given by education officials and in Shanghai, group discussions and visits in high schools in Shanghai and Zhejiang.

### **2.3.2 Interview setting**

The data mainly derive from face-to-face interviews, telephone and e-mail interviews and non-participative observations<sup>9</sup> during experts' conferences, high school and university visits and trainings for educational bureaucrats.

Except the e-mail communications with one interviewee, I had always taken notes during the interview processes and no audio recorders were used. After every interview, I immediately translated the notes into readable transcripts and digitalized them for later use. As I am not using a discourse analysis methodology in this study, the precision of interviewees' language use is not at absolute priority, but the opinions, beliefs, values, visions and the way of articulating and arguing policy issues had been the main concern. Note-taking with shortcuts proves to be very efficient and convenient, especially at group discussions, for example, during the high school visits, where school directors, teachers and educational officials sat together and talked in frequent rotations, one could directly write down who said what.

### **2.3.3 Overview of data set**

The Chinese sources include academic journals, media reports, policy releases, official documents and educational publications. They were partly gathered from online databases and through archival readings at the National Library in Beijing and the Shanghai Municipal Library, and partly received from interview partners and university institutions by request.

Altogether, the data fall into three categories:

- 43 Interviews (MOE, provincial education bureaus, policy experts, universities admission offices, high school teachers and principals, students and citizens.)
- Chinese newspapers and journals: Beijing Review, People's Daily, China Education Daily, Education Research, Higher Education Research
- Statistics: China Education Yearbooks (MOE and provincial), MOE digital statistic database, OECD Education Reports; Lab data (161 subjects at Nankai University)

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<sup>9</sup> With non-participative observation, I mean that I personally joined the events, meetings and conferences at high schools, universities and educational administrations, but I did not actively participate in any discussions. All the data were collected based on passive observations by focusing on how participants were expressing their own interests and arguing for their values and beliefs regarding the admission systems.



### **3 The type of policy: Conflicting values of admission system, distribution by quotas and admission stratification**

This chapter explains one of the content factors: the type of policy. As the thesis deals with university admission policy that determines the allocation of slots in China, the policy values for higher education selection will be investigated and specified in the Chinese context. Per Grindle's implementation model, the type of policy is viewed as an important factor in determining the goal setting at the central government level. The existing institutional tool (the quota distribution system) demonstrates how the state is balancing the conflicting values on the admission system. A review of the debates over admission stratification illuminates the dynamics of changing needs in the society and the overall request for a more legitimate selection method in tertiary education.

As hypothesized, *the more sensitive the policy issue is, the smaller the discretion space is. The more complex the interest networks are, the smaller the discretion space is.* The analysis of the chapter demonstrates that the sensibility of admission policy in China exerts a wider social and political impact on the discretion space in the decision-making process. The affected groups of admission policy represent diverse interests that can hardly be balanced through one single policy innovation. The complexity of interest networks further forces the central decision makers to choose certain policy values over others in order to ensure overall stability in China's society.

#### **3.1 Persistent conflicts between meritocratic and egalitarian principles in policymaking for admissions**

In today's socialist China, meritocratic access restrictions are widely accepted and legitimized in university enrollment – which actually challenges the conventional wisdom that socialist education breeds only socialist-minded students and guaranteeing non-meritocratic access to universities (Fuchs-Schündeln 2016:2). Yet, a selection process based on merit is ironically perceived as a legitimize way to achieve the status of educated elites and to realize social upward mobility. The origins of meritocracy can be traced back to the imperial selection of civil servants, but with social transformation over time the selection criteria and the understanding of “merit” have experienced dynamic changes according to new social and economic needs.

With the establishment of the communist regime, egalitarian values have been imposed on policymaking in compliance with the regime's ideology so that meritocratic values were seriously challenged. However, in order to meet the labor needs of a developing economy, merit-based selection remains an efficient means to distribute higher education resources. In fact, the co-existence of both competing values creates contradictions that directly result in fluctuating policymaking outcomes for the higher education admission system in China.

### **3.1.1 The origin of meritocracy, institutional foundation and congruence between meritocratic values and modernization needs**

The roots of a meritocratic selection derive from the imperial civil service examination system in China. The persistent practice of meritocratic selection has produced stable institutions for the formation of elites that are widely legitimized for granting social upward mobility in society. In the broad political and social context, the institutional base of awarding elite status plays a decisive role in maintaining social and political stability (Acemoglu and Robinson 2008; North, et al. 2009; Rozman and Bernstein 1981). The meritocratic selection system in China has been therefore in full grasp of the central state and the attempts for admission policy innovations in fact elicit institutional changes in the mechanism of upward mobility, which need careful and wise management to ensure social stability.

Institutionalized imperial selection of literati germinated during the Shang Dynasty (Cleverley 1985:1), solidified during the Han Dynasty (Qian 2001:13-15), peaked under the Tang Dynasty (Qian 2001:54-55; Têng 1936:19-22) and essentially collapsed during the Qing Dynasty in 1905 (Ferguson 1906). About 700 selective examinations were organized throughout the imperial history (Têng 1936:383, 407-418).

Meritocratic selection, as the term suggests, is a selection based on merit. The institutional foundation established by the imperial courts set the rules of the game by exerting absolute power over the definition of "merit," *who* deserves it (the selection criteria), *how* one attains it (test content and procedures), *from where* elites will derive (distribution based on origin), and ultimately *who* gets what (elite privileges).

Instrumentally, the state applied sufficient tools to legitimize the institutionalized selection system. First, the merit of a literati was defined by state-sponsored Confucian values.

A qualified state-literati shall achieve a balance between virtue (德) and ability (才), while virtue (morality) was viewed as *the* prioritized category in the selection (Sima 1956:14; Sima 1959:21-23). Filial piety, trust, harmonious relationships all belong to the basic package of virtuous qualities that a gentleman (君子) shall obtain and perfect in a lifetime<sup>10</sup>. Competitive written examinations were introduced to evaluate one's qualities based on unified test content so that biased selection through family ties and lineages was counterbalanced (Qian 2001:54-55; Têng 1936:19-22). Confucian classics were questioned in the test papers so that every well-educated adult was indoctrinated by unified ideologies to achieve the required qualifications (Fairbank and Goldman 2006:67). The essays were read blind by elite officials who were sequestered in palace hall to avoid bribery and favoritism (Lin 1971:35). All these institutional settings made the test-based meritocratic selection a legitimate system that enjoyed wide social acceptance and credibility.

Second, a quota system was designed as an institutional device to control the origins of potential elites. The state control over the quota ratio mainly served to maintain the great unity (大一统) and social stability. The manipulation of the quota was aimed, for example, at solving the controversy of southern dominance in obtaining literati degrees and to co-opt the Northerners (Elman 2013:26-28; Van der Sprenkel 1961:310) or to conciliate the Manchus and Mongolians during the Qing Dynasty (Elman 2013:121-122). To legitimate the quota calculation, distinctive variables (e.g., province population, land tax and cultural tradition) were deliberately taken into account (Liu 2016:32).

Third, institutions were created to grant privileges for selected elites. Degree-holders were exempted from physical penalties, military services, and some tax payments (Glöckner 2013:195). Those who immediately could not fill in official positions, would be dispatched to local levels to manage grassroots governance (Perry 2015:4). Despite the material benefits, literati-officials enjoyed high esteem in China. Depending upon one's official rank, one was

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<sup>10</sup> In the chronicle historiography *资治通鉴* (*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid to Government*), Sima Guang (1019-1086) differentiated people into four categories: Sages (圣人) are those who achieved both virtue and ability; fools (愚人) are those who failed in both; gentlemen (君子) are those who gained great virtue but acquired less ability; and petty persons (小人) are those who do not value virtue and merely have ability. In his opinion, even in the most upsetting situations, when neither sages nor gentlemen were available, it is still better to choose the fools, not the petty persons. In other words, virtue should override ability in talent selection.

entitled to an ancestral temple (Weber 1951:115). The fact that the degrees and the social privileges therein were not hereditary and that the tests were in theory open to all men, regardless of one's ancestry, reinforced the impression that the selection process was a legitimate means of upward mobility; that the selected deserved the privileges awarded to them for higher qualifications.

The institutional foundation for meritocratic selection remained relatively stable throughout the imperial history until the modernization attempts that began in the early twentieth century, when the pursuit of modern technologies and national development gradually came to the front. The desire to obtain advanced knowledge through higher education shifted from traditional meritocratic values towards knowledge and skills related to modern technologies. Modern universities were established according to various Western models, in particular the American model (Zha 2011:20). The nationalist government managed to maintain state control of meritocratic selection and created a centralized admission system for modern higher education (Gao 1997:71). Learning from the West became fashionable, and a group of new elites, who had once studied abroad, emerged in society (Hayhoe 1996:19). Hence, early modernization projects mainly dealt with the manpower needs for national development. Reflected in the changes of meritocracy, these modernization attempts in fact aimed at a congruity between traditional values on merit and the new qualification demands for technological advancement.

### **3.1.2 The selection criteria under Mao (1949-1976): Egalitarian ideal, challenges for meritocracy and the cultural revolution**

On the eve of the Chinese Communist victory in 1949, meritocratic values were immediately challenged due to structural changes and an ideological twist. Egalitarianism became the core of the new regime's ideology whereas economic growth was eagerly desired to build a new socialist China from scratch. Reflected in education and admission policymaking, the two goals resulted in ineluctable clashes stemming from deep-seated conflicts between egalitarian and meritocratic principles. As Munro notes, "the existence of quality education, which is necessary to produce high-level scientific and technical skills, is impossible without some serious abuse of egalitarian ideal (Munro 1972:258)." The conflict between these two ideological and policy

values was (and remains) a perpetual obstacle in socialist China's admissions policymaking. The competing values resulted in constant policy swings.

This section presents a tug-of-war over policymaking for selecting talent and for awarding elite status by contrasting the selecting criteria derived from two sets of contradictory values. Chairman Mao Zedong's ambitious goal of egalitarianism was reflected in his radical approach to creating a classless and equal society in which individuals must be moral, altruistic, cooperative, and devoted wholeheartedly to the nation. Education, in his eyes, was a tool to realize the proletariat dictatorship (Li 1980:172). The analysis below falls into two parts, with the Cultural Revolution as the watershed.

### **Prior to the cultural revolution (1949-1966)**

The CCP took over about 200 universities from the nationalists in 1949, with one-third of them run by private funds and missionaries (Orleans 1987:186). Having eradicated the Protestant and Catholic churches and having cast the missionaries into exile (Mariani 2011), the Communist Party looked up the Soviet model and in 1952 reshuffled the universities into specialized technical colleges in order to speed up technical training for socialist construction (Glassman 1979:6; Orleans 1987:187). The restructuring of universities abolished a large number of faculties in the social sciences and in the humanities (Song 2010). In the same year, the national university entrance examination (*gaokao*) was introduced to recruit young Chinese for higher learning (Liu 2009:25-26). The examinations retained the meritocratic values that heavily weighed academic qualifications since reestablishing the national economy with trained qualified manpower was the initial intent. However, the competitive examinations favored children from old intellectual families and enabled the reproduction of education elites. Gradually, higher education fostered an intelligentsia that was alienated from workers and peasants by enjoying a privileged life style (Andreas 2009:168-169). Moreover, the quality-based university admissions overwhelmingly excluded the masses in the countryside, thereby unintentionally generating the rural-urban divide in determining the destiny of young Chinese (Munro 1972:258; Orleans 1987:197). It seemed that the merit-based selection was simply a choice of loathed compromise, as the Communist regime itself was forced to use the knowledge of experts. If knowledge could only be achieved at the expense of the regime's egalitarian ideal, so be it. Yet, everything has its limits.

For Mao and his radical supporters, this ostensibly elitist outcome was a noxious enemy of egalitarianism. The bourgeois worldview of the intellectual elites, the systematic reproduction of old elites, and the emerging revisionist stratum with Soviet influences constructed a breeding ground for intellectual elitism (Andreas 2009:168). Indeed, various attempts at political intervention were introduced for class leveling during the Great Leap Forward. Schools were required to combine “mental and labor” in curriculum (Lu 1958:1-12), a political screening system was installed to curtail the advantages of intellectual offspring and to increase enrollment of children from workers, peasants and soldiers (Liu 2009:29; Munro 1972:274; Price 1987:174). Nevertheless, the implementation of the reform policies encountered insurmountable obstacles caused by the divergent policy values of the factions at the top (Glassman 1974:217-229; Price 1987:160; Wang 1969:29). Mao saw the danger of losing his footing in the CCP leadership while simultaneously being threatened by an emerging elitism and revisionism through meritocracy (Glassman 1979:7-9). A thorough reform in education became inevitable. A long list of factors caused the Cultural Revolution, but the problems in the field of education definitively accounted for a major one<sup>11</sup>.

### **The great proletarian cultural revolution and virtuocratic selection (1966-67)**

The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution marked the end of meritocratic selection. A politically intended revolution in the field of culture mostly targeted education based on the culture it bred. The revolutionary goal in education was primarily to flatten the pyramid in the education system by redistributing educational opportunities equally across the population in order to prevent the reproduction of intellectual aristocrats and to stymie the formation of a revisionist officialdom that used knowledge as a means to gain privilege over the masses. Sequentially, the meritocratic structure of the key-point schools, which favored the children of intellectual families, was eliminated. Widespread ideological campaigns were organized to uproot the meritocratic cultural foundation that had traditionally legitimized the class distinctions based on knowledge.

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<sup>11</sup> The 16 May Notification was regarded as the launch of the Cultural Revolution. In the Notification, Mao denounced the political errors of his political opponents; the majority of those errors was in the field of education, including errors made by the Minister of Education Lu Dingyi (Dong 2012). The declassification and appearance of the Notification in the *People's Daily* on 17 May, 1967 marked the “mighty beginning” of the movement nationwide (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 20016: 41).

The distinction between mental and manual labor was eliminated. The status of teachers and intellectuals was systematically undermined through re-education programs and public denouncements (Andreas 2009:162, 166, 168-173).

As the main concern of this study, tertiary education demonstrated to what extent Mao was willing to compromise egalitarian values to meet the needs of expertise for China's modernization. In 1968, Mao revealed his compromise solution in the 21 July Directive, which was used as the fundamental principle in reforming tertiary education during the Cultural Revolution.

It is still necessary to have universities; here I refer mainly to colleges of science and engineering. However, it is essential to shorten the length of schooling, revolutionize education, put proletarian politics in command, and take the road of the Shanghai Machine Tools Plant in training technicians from among the workers. Students should be selected from among workers and peasants with practical experience, and they should return to production after a few years' study (Renmin 1968:26).

Mao's compromise showed his strategic thinking of allowing only a limited amount of people into being trained in his preferred fields that would bring about immediate rewards for socialist construction. In order to reinforce the control over future experts, he delineated the very nature of socialist intellectuals to be "laborers with socialist consciousness and culture" (有社会主义觉悟的有文化的劳动者) and further strengthened college selection based on students' class origins, which substantially discriminated the children of intellectual elites (ibid.: 30-31).

In line with Mao's Directive, institutional barriers that historically had constrained children from the proletarian class into entering schools and achieving higher educational attainment were eradicated. University enrollment based on *gaokao* examinations, which had excluded large numbers of grassroots children due to lower academic qualifications, was regarded as a bourgeois remnant that neglected political qualifications and consequently reinforced the reproduction of class distinctions (CCP 1966:3-5). Consequently, the meritocratic selection based on *gaokao* was smashed thoroughly (ibid.). In its stead, a recommendation system was introduced for college selection whereby students were recommended by factories, work units, production brigades and military units. Thus, the worker-peasant-soldier students emerged (PekingReview 1975:13). Teaching contents were intentionally altered to foster a new education ideology that downplayed the role of knowledge and emphasized the value of labor. Courses were organized to combine theory and practice by

resuming the half-study-half-work program during the Great Leap Forward (Andreas 2009:175).

The recommendation system had completely altered the selection principles and turned the process into political deliberations with mass participation (or supervision). Susan Shirk differentiates three competing principles in admitting college students: meritocracy, feodocracy and virtuocracy.

The meritocratic selection, as presented earlier, represents a logic of efficient distribution of educational opportunities according to one's intellectual ability. Feodocracy employs the selection criteria of ascriptive status such as caste, class origin, race, native region, sex or religious origin. Virtuocratic selection, as argued by Shirk, was radicalized by the CCP during the Cultural Revolution, which selected students and awarded life chances according to moral and political criteria (Shirk 1984:57). Undoubtedly, the selection among workers, peasants, and soldiers effectively solved the problematics of class origin in the first place. Thus, the rest of the selection criteria just had to serve for the sufficient assessment of one's moral and political qualifications. One's individual performance (个人表现) must be profoundly discussed at the deliberation sessions; it was evaluated by commitment to Communist ideology, support for the party, willingness to work hard and a collective spirit (Andreas 2009:200). If a work unit recommended students, university admissions officers were dispatched to the local unit in order to run deliberation sessions with the cadres as well as the ordinary members of the unit. A summary of the divergent responses of the participants mainly determined whether a recommended student could ascend on the final list (ibid.: 201-202). Nevertheless, virtuocratic principles had an inherent problem that the selection criteria were all evaluated based on subjective views and one of the direct outcomes was de-legitimization caused by backdoor corruptions and manipulation of personal performance. The workers and peasants were delighted to see a chance in the virtuocratic system, as their cultural capitals had restricted them greatly in the former system of meritocracy, but virtuocracy told them that one could be awarded with better life chances, when he or she was, in the eyes of the others, morally and politically virtuous. Consciously or unconsciously, the virtuocratic selection principles constructed a behavioral philosophy that induced opportunism, sycophancy and patronage, avoidance of activities and privatization (Shirk 1984:66-70). Nevertheless, the recommendation

system has effectively disrupted the reproduction of education elites and therefore altered the class origin of university students, with the enrolled cohorts coming overwhelmingly from families of workers, peasants and soldiers (Andreas 2009:203).

### **3.1.3 Post-Mao admissions policy: *Gaokao* revival, backlash of meritocracy and higher education massification**

With the collapse of the Gang of Four in 1976 and the charismatic comeback of Deng Xiaoping, China's politics entered a new era. The party began to introspect the devastating mistakes of the Culture Revolution and was desperate to repair the nation from 10 years of disaster. To quote the Chinese saying: A fall in pit, a gain in wit (吃一堑，长一智). Education, in which the CCP had incurred tremendous political and social costs, would be immediately normalized and put on the right track. Deng volunteered himself to take charge of the reform in the education sector (Deng 1977). Already before Mao's death, some rhetorical preparation for educational reform had been circulated among the education bureaucracy (Pepper 1990:70). With previous negotiations and preparations, the U.S. liaison office in Beijing learned in fall 1978 that Deng himself had ordered the MOE to send 10,000 students to America as soon as possible (Pepper 1990:71). Tongji University in Shanghai had already sent groups of students to German universities for master programs (Interview 14). High on the agenda of the post-Mao regime was the prospect of international academic exchanges intent to provide world-class training for a new generation of educated youth who could lead China's modernization effort (Perry 2015:9). Both domestically and internationally, one could infer a strategic turn in Deng who opened China's doors to the global market and who left no space for any possible return to isolationism.

#### **The 1977 *gaokao* reinstatement**

On 6 August 1977, Deng held the National Meeting of Science and Technology in the People's Hall in Beijing, where over 30 intellectuals and educational bureaucrats were convened to express their opinions on the reform of the educational system (Yu 2010:41-42). Wuhan University's Prof. Zha Quanxing showed his concern for the inadequate academic qualifications of the student body, suggesting an immediate restoration of the *gaokao* system. Deng quickly checked the realistic time schedule with the Ministry and unhesitatingly declared the restoration of the *gaokao* system at the meeting (ibid.). In late 1977, millions of Chinese

youth registered to take the exams, with only one percent being admitted (Perry 2015:9). The 1977-undergraduate cohort is generally honored as the “legendary Class of 1977”—the first generation of intellectual youth after the Cultural Revolution who successfully entered universities based on meritocratic selection values (Xu 2007). With the reinstatement of *gaokao*, the selection returned to the exam-based model in which “merit” was detached from ideological indoctrination and was redefined as scholastic aptitude and intellectual ability. The meritocratic backlash had earned Deng popularity with ordinary citizens, especially in the cities (where access to education is widespread), but even in the countryside (where access to education is more limited) (Shirk 1984:77).

### **Ideological twist and *gaokao* meritocracy**

In the Deng era, the whole reform package was subtly reinforced with an ideological twist, gradually merging the factional division and the competing selection values into one. Deng frequently propagated the key roles of science and technology for socialist modernization and emphasized that education was the key to both. He proclaimed himself as the humble layman leading the professionals and intellectuals (Pepper 1990:69).

This move, in fact, reshaped the image of intellectuals in China and awarded them once again a decent social status. Meanwhile, the party carried out the political rehabilitation of those intellectuals who were violently assaulted by the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution. Political labels such as “historical counterrevolutionary” or “rightists” were removed from university intellectuals (Pepper 1990:131). Selection criteria for college admissions became increasingly merit-based by focusing on students’ scholastic aptitude. Political screening was no longer applied in order to classify students based on their family or class background. The revolutionary offspring with “red and upright family roots” (根正苗红) was no longer favored merely due to their political activism and communist origin. Put simply, Deng’s reform vision for the education sector followed a very practical strategy—downplaying the role of political ideology and maximizing the intellectual potential of the younger generation.

Since that time, merit (or quality) has been interpreted as the students’ intellectual ability and scholastic aptitude, while the *gaokao* grades have become the most powerful criterion to assess the level of student quality. Despite widespread criticism of rote learning and “studying to the test” that the *gaokao* encourages, the *gaokao* test was open to everyone and was graded blindly,

reinforcing its reputation for incorruptibility (Perry 2015:9-10). Consequently, the return of meritocratic selection in higher education access was legitimized both politically and socially. The controversy over the selection system has been mainly focused on the institutional design of the competitive system that shall be properly managed to balance different social needs.

### **Post-1989: Making admission policies for stability, economic growth and regime durability**

The Tian'anmen Student Movement did not shatter the meritocratic *gaokao* system, despite the protesters being the first generation of intellectual elites who emerged following the reinstatement of the *gaokao*. After the crackdown at Tian'anmen Square, Deng struggled to ensure that the incident did not push China off his preferred course of reform and he openly declared China's commitment to economic reform and open policy with the West. Meanwhile, political reforms during this liberal period were crafted carefully to avoid instability (Zhang, et al. 2002:551). To be sure, this question of stability has been a deep-seated concern in policymaking for almost all policy fields in China, and policymaking in university admissions would be no exception as Deng summarized at the meeting of the CCP Standing Committee on 6 June 1989:

Of all China's problems, the one that trumps everything is the need for stability. We have jump on anything that might bring instability; we can't give ground to this point, can't bend at all. And we can't care what the foreigners say. Let them say what they want! Anyway, it's always the same: always how benighted we are. They've been at it for years, berating us constantly, but what's it got them? All these boils down to one thing: China can't take chaos. We can't allow chaos, and we have to keep saying so, bluntly and openly. We'd be wrong not to (Zhang, et al. 2002:556).

The policy changes in university enrollment reflected the party logic of maintaining social stability. The 1999 radical expansion of university admissions essentially represented the rationale of "stability first" in admission policymaking. More importantly, the root cause of the 1999 expansion indicated why and how admission policymaking was interlinked with macro-economic conditions in China. This logical thread that bound the two was the new source of regime legitimacy and social stability since the 1978 reform and opening-up: economic growth.

In the heyday of economic marketization in early 1990s, a set of economic policies were already in ferment to transform the planned economy into a market-oriented one. The most striking policy was the reconstruction of state-owned enterprises, which resulted in millions of

workers suddenly becoming jobless in their 40s and 50s. Meanwhile, the 1997 Asian financial crisis inflicted deleterious side-effects on China's export-oriented economy. For the CCP, the large number of middle-aged unemployed was a latent danger for China's regime stability. The economic deceleration caused by the financial crisis was another danger that jeopardized the legitimation of the country's economic reform policies.

It was at this moment that an open letter arrived at the CCP center. Tang Min and Zuo Xiaolei—the Western-trained economist couple—co-authored the letter in which they suggested that the university enrollment be doubled in the next three to four years, and that the tuition fees be raised to 10,000 RMB per student per year. They argued that Chinese parents traditionally were willing to invest in their children's education, and that the expansion policy would encourage more parents to dig into their savings to pay for a university education. They made convincing mathematical calculations that concluded an increase of private spending in higher education would boost the Chinese economy by contributing at least 0.5 percent in GDP growth. Moreover, the most convincing argument seemed to be that the enrollment expansion would delay the entry of high school graduates into the labor market, and temporally ameliorate the pressures of rising unemployment (Tang and Zuo 2004 ). The core leaders were convinced by these arguments. They managed to push the expansion decision through the CCP internal discussions, and eventually made the implementation a reality, despite the opposition from the MOE (Wang 2014:147-149). This prompt policy shift revealed the rationale of the CCP in upholding party legitimacy and safeguarding social stability. The party intended to use a radical expansion of admissions as a policy instrument to boost domestic consumption, stimulate economic growth, create jobs, delay the entry of high school graduates into the job market, make room for laid-off workers, and thereby reduce China's overall unemployment rate. The side-effects to higher education were of secondary importance when the party considered that its rule was threatened (Wang 2014:151). In fact, against the backdrop of the 2008 global financial crisis, the CCP again utilized the expansion strategy to counteract the explosion of unemployment and to ensure general stability, but this time, the expansion was limited to the enrollments of graduate students (Jiaofa 2009).

At this point, it is fair to say that the meritocratic selection in contemporary China needs to be: (1) recognized by the Chinese people who see the opportunity of upward mobility; and

(2) accepted by the party state which monitors and adjusts the institutional base of the distribution in compliance with the macro-economic blueprint of the nation (including economic factors of private spending, (un)employment rate, labor needs and GDP growth). In addition, both requirements (or policy conditions) are closely inter-related with social stability and regime stability.

### **Meritocracy in the age of higher education massification**

The abrupt policy changes in 1999 effectively quadrupled the number of undergraduate enrollments in five years<sup>12</sup>. By 1998, higher education admission policies had followed a strategy of “restrained growth,” expecting a gross enrollment ratio<sup>13</sup> to be around 12 to 13 percent in 2010 (Hao 1998:13, 15-16). However, due to this radical expansion, the actual ratio of gross enrollment in 2010 reached a ratio of 26.5 percent (MOE 2010a), which, according to Martin Trow’s definition, already exceeded the threshold ratio (15 percent) for mass higher education (Trow 1973:7).

The direct outcome of this higher education “massification” is the inflation of university degrees (i.e., a decrease in value of being a university graduate). Therefore, what it meant to be part of the education elites changed. In fact, in many developed countries, the “massification” of higher education has been followed by the emergence of leading universities and their access to which creates a new privileged class of eligible cohorts. The Ivy League in the United States serves as an example. Meritocratic selection has been reshaped in the age of higher education massification and it takes a new form of elite-building that is supported by a stratification of universities. With the radical expansion of university enrollments, the Chinese universities have grown accordingly to accommodate this drastic increase of students. The stratification of universities becomes an inevitable outcome that burgeons a new measurement of intellectual elites. If the entry to higher education institutions becomes natural, the access to leading universities overrides and replaces its function of making elites.

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<sup>12</sup> The university recruitment grew from 1.08 million in 1998 to 1.55 million in 1999 (with a dramatic growth rate of 47.4 percent). Until 2004, actual enrollment had surged to 4.47 million, more than four times its number in 1998. The statistics derive from the Education Yearbook (1999 ~ 2005) published by the MOE on the official website: [http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/moe\\_364/zgjynj\\_2015/](http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_364/zgjynj_2015/).

<sup>13</sup> The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is defined by the UNESCO as: total enrollment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education in a given school year (UNESCO 2009: 9).

The university stratification in China is sponsored by the state, with the leading universities being awash in state funding. These universities are mostly state-run, but the distribution of government funding reinforces and institutionalizes the stratification, with the largest portion of educational investments going to a fewer leading universities. In fact, meritocratic selection based on institutionalized stratification is employed in job allocations, too, with students at the higher echelons of the university rankings being absorbed by the country's top employers. A human resource manager of Volkswagen, for example, informed this author that his team only talks to graduates from the top ten universities within China (Interview 13). Another employee of a large state-owned company said, "[a] bachelor's degree is the basic requirement, [but] we screen the application forms based on the level of universities. The forms of those who are not from the 211 and 985 universities end up in the trash can."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the CCP cadres are overwhelmingly graduates from the leading universities. Chen Shuo and his team collected personal profiles of 1,279 prefectural city mayors and 921 prefectural party secretaries. The data show that over 50 percent of these cadres hold doctoral degrees, and almost all of them have some form of higher education (Chen 2016). Indeed, the top-level positions along both Party and governmental lines are mostly filled by graduates from leading universities.

In the BBS forum of the *People's Daily*, one journalist reported the routine position shifts after the nineteenth Party Congress; the journalist discovered that, among the 31 provincial-level leading positions, 30 were filled with cadres with a graduate degree or higher, whereas 15 were filled with cadres with a doctoral degree (Sha 2018). It was not only the stratification of universities that re-defined the meritocratic institutions, but also a diploma inflation that provoked even harsher evaluation principles for qualifications.

### **3.2 Institutional legacies of meritocratic selection and the debates over admission policies in contemporary China**

The *gaokao* system represents the modernized form of meritocratic selection in China. It serves the needs of a modern society, but at the same time, it inherited its deep institutional roots from Imperial China that has had a great impact on the admission rules and policymaking.

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<sup>14</sup> From author's own WeChat source.

Accompanied by various factors that are typical for modern societies, the admissions policies need to respond to a variety of social and political concerns which are often in conflict with one another. The following section evaluates how these institutional legacies shape the current *gaokao* system and how it demonstrates the reasons why its institutional basis invokes controversy and conflict.

### **3.2.1 Political legacies and the debates over *gaokao* admissions**

The *gaokao* selection has to a large extent maintained the institutional foundation of meritocratic values: (1) monopolistic power of the state in setting examination rules and content; (2) state control over enrollment capacity and the distribution of university slots. These two aspects reveal the dominance of state intervention in two forms: the examination rules and the rules of allocating higher education opportunities. The institutionalization of these rules is mainly carried out through the implementation of admissions policies and administrative measures.

#### **Monopolistic power over examination rules and content**

The rules of the *gaokao* examinations are determined by monopolistic power of the state in setting the examination rules and content—through which the selection criteria are defined and unified at the national level. The state builds entry requirements into the selection system, which in turn determine the official interpretation of a qualified applicant. State-intervention in higher education admission affects one’s educational path and determines the identity of a future elite by establishing criteria used to select and evaluate students (Fuchs-Schündeln 2016:2). Despite disagreements among the ruling elites as to what constitutes the “right” qualifications, the state maintains its monopoly on the process.

In the *gaokao* system, students’ merit is represented by the quantified numbers (the scores) functioning as the decisive arbiter in the admission process. Although this quantification has improved the selection efficiency and has given the impression that the selection is fair, the reality is that one point less in the final scores could easily deny a student’s entry into his or her preferred university, thus changing the entire vision of educational development. Therefore, conflicting voices from different social strata arise about the *gaokao* rules, aiming to press the government to make a policy change to the existing system.

The content of the *gaokao* tests is structured according to the required test subjects. The total score of the subject tests, which represents the students' scholastic aptitude, is weighted heavily in the admission: the higher the score, the better university one could attend. In this respect, one can identify a swing of selection criteria from virtue to ability.

Until 1977, one's moral conduct, or virtue, was considered *the* key criterion in overriding other criteria in the selection process, despite the fact that "virtue" was interpreted differently at specific points in time. Thus, the function of the *gaokao* exams only tested the academic abilities of students. The *gaokao* admission subsequently witnessed a diversification of selection criteria and enrollment methods since 1985, driven by the social forces of the rising elites (新贵) emerging through economic reform (Interview 7). Some additional rules in the selection procedures implicitly indicated that extra-curriculum qualifications could increase one's educational opportunity at leading universities too (e.g., if students had obtained awards and fellowships, extra points would have been added to their total score whereby they would have become more competitive vis-à-vis their more privileged peers). To be sure, the score is the most influential measurement in the selection process. As the return on additional credentials was (and is) attractive, Chinese parents discovered new ways to enhance their children's educational path toward leading universities. They started to invest in extracurricular education. For example, they invested in specific courses for advanced mathematics, or in training for musical instruments that range from the violin to the piano to traditional *erhu* and *pipa*. The cost for these extracurricular activities was (and is) very high; many low-income families could barely afford it. Gradually, the explosive investment in qualification credentials caused the classical problem of intergenerational cultural reproduction (Bourdieu 1977). One education sociologist added in an interview with this author:

during that time, the government started to advocate 'quality education (素质教育)', which initially aimed to eliminate rote-learning and to encourage all-round development of the young students (德智体美劳全面发展)...but what is 'quality education'? There are many ways to interpret it and to achieve it. Playing piano, dancing, playing sports, writing calligraphy—these are all qualities that could make a difference in the selection. In order to avoid social downward mobility of their offspring, the rising elites invest in all these educational activities...but the attainment of these qualifications is not very much linked with formal schooling, but rather with household education and family investments. Thus, the admissions system is not evaluating the abilities of the student body, *but of their parents* [emphasis added]. This is wrong (Interview 7).

This judgement points to a fundamental problem in China's meritocratic selection system: the ambiguous interpretation of "quality". Though the state possesses a monopoly over test rules and content, it nevertheless fails to provide a convincing definition of "quality" in the advocacy of this self-initiated concept.

Based on the admission results of a large sample size, scholars in China propose that students' merit be composed of four categories of ability: (1) scholastic ability, measured by the *gaokao* grades; (2) innovative ability, measured by obtained awards in domestic and international competitions; (3) organizational ability, measured by the engagement in extracurricular school activities; and (4) comprehensive ability, measured by attained honors or the CCP membership (Liu 2014:121). As previously indicated, the most heavily weighted ability is scholastic. The other three are used as reference points for the admissions committees, but, in certain cases, they can be transformed into bonus points to total *gaokao* grades.<sup>15</sup> This decision-making power is delegated to the provincial level admissions commission.<sup>16</sup> The existing debates over the *gaokao* system partly derive from the loose definition of a student's merit which is implemented instrumentally in admission practices. To what extent does the *gaokao* score reflect the *real* ability of a student? To what extent do extracurricular qualifications reflect a student's intrinsic interest in the skills that they have perfected? All these questions seem to be irrelevant to the competitive entrance selection process, if a quantified score is the most powerful demonstration of one's "merit." Despite the controversies and disputes over the admissions system, Chinese parents and students alike faithfully comply with the test rules. Almost all informants expressed their opinions with one oft-heard catchphrase in China "没办法 (there is no other choice)". When invited by a senior high school to talk to parents of the student body, a university professor noted that both teachers and parents alike complained about the *gaokao* rules, but they still did everything they could to ensure that

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<sup>15</sup> The rules of quantifying various qualification credentials are not unified at national level, normally they are carried out under the provincial supervision. One thing needs to be pointed out here: students should be able to prove their extra-curriculum qualifications with prizes in competitions or official certifications, a "hobby-level" qualification remains a hobby.

<sup>16</sup> According to the Department of College Students of the MOE, the provincial-level admissions committee shall decide whether and how many extra points can be added to those students who had fulfilled the requirements for bonus points (Jiaoxue 2016).

students received the highest scores possible (Interview 31). The logic of the parents is very simple: *if you want to play the game, follow the rules.*

### **The quota system for *gaokao***

As an institutional instrument, the quota system sustains meritocratic selection and remains under state control. The power of quota allocation is employed to maintain the unity of an enormous country with high diversity. “Unity with diversity” was (and is) a perennial issue that every government in China must address.

Hence, the *gaokao* selection also applies a quota system to manipulate the distribution of undergraduate entry possibilities,<sup>17</sup> but the system is more elaborate than previous meritocratic systems. The quota system for *gaokao* is bound to the administrative division of the People’s Republic. Each provincial jurisdiction is considered as one unit, to which centrally planned quotas will be allocated.<sup>18</sup> The *gaokao* quotas are calculated based on a complex interaction of variables. To be sure, both the quota calculation and decision-making process remain a black box of sorts. It is unknown whether there is a mathematical formula used by the educational bureaucrats to arrive at the exact answers. Based on the available statistics and this author’s field data, however, some general principles are presumed to draw a broad picture of the calculations.

First, the MOE is responsible for the collection of basic data from which quotas are calculated. Every year, each university needs to complete a form indicating its expected number of enrollments. It must specify **how many** students from **which** province will be enrolled to **which** faculty (Jiaofa 2016). By way of example: The Law School of University XYZ enrolls in 2017 30 undergraduates from around the country. Among the enrollment, 10 seats are reserved for students from Beijing, five are reserved for students from Shanghai, 10 are reserved for students from Shandong Province, and five for students from Zhejiang Province. Universities usually determine enrollment capacity based historical trends and numbers suggested by individual faculties. Normally, a deputy-president of the university who is

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<sup>17</sup> Except quotas for undergraduates, the state also set quotas for graduate students and doctoral students. This thesis is only concerned with undergraduates.

<sup>18</sup> In this respect, the quota system is essentially compatible with the socialist planned system. Even during its economic marketization, the higher education sector reformed almost everything, except the central plan of the quota distribution itself.

responsible for the annual admission, issues and guides the work of the admissions office. At each university, the process of collecting the numbers are similar, but slight variations can be found.

The deputy-president of a centrally-funded university in Shanghai described the process of quota calculations as follows:

Every year after the spring festival, all faculties will report their expected number of enrollments to the admissions office at the university. Generally speaking, we try to maintain a stable development of enrollment capacity [...] there won't be great decrease or increase of admissions numbers, except when it is centrally intended. Once we have received the statistics from all faculties, the admissions office will pass on the information to the MOE. (Interview 14)

Locally-funded universities follow procedures different from those of the central universities. It reveals the interwoven networks of the educational authorities and the university admissions offices beyond jurisdiction boundaries. The vice-president of a university funded by the municipal government of Shanghai described the processes as follows:

Normally, when the Five-Year-Plan is finished, the local admissions plan is finished accordingly. The capacity of enrollment in the next five years will be relatively stable. As a local university in Shanghai, the educational authorities will allow us to reserve seats for local Shanghainese, as they need to ensure the growth of gross enrollment ratio. The Shanghai Education Commission will give us the exact ratio of Shanghai and non-Shanghai students, based on which, each faculty will set up their annual enrollment quotas. Nowadays, it is not an easy job to deal with the enrollments from other provinces. The head of our university admissions office needs to communicate with other provincial education bureaus to settle the admission quotas from their province. As long as the mutual agreement is reached, we will keep it. [...] Our enrollment plan will be handed in to the Shanghai Education Commission, which then sends all collected numbers to the MOE (Interview 28).

As the interviews indicate, the collection of primary quotas is completed through communication channels between university admission offices, provincial education bureaus, and the MOE. Depending on the administrative level of the universities, the communication path varies slightly. If a university is centrally-funded, it reports the quota plan directly to the MOE whereas the locally-funded university reports to the local education bureau.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly enough, locally-funded universities need to establish unofficial ties<sup>20</sup> with provincial educational bureaus across the country to ensure (and hopefully maintain) the annual

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<sup>19</sup> The bureaucratic nexus of universities and educational authorities shall be elaborated in Chapter 4.2.

<sup>20</sup> Locally-funded universities have only bureaucratic affiliation to the provincial educational bureaus, where the universities are located. They theoretically have no administrative ties with other provincial educational bureaus. Thus, this relationship is actually not solid, but the universities could make it stable based on interest exchanges, personal ties or other lobbying techniques.

admission quotas in each province and the corresponding university-bureaucracy relationship. From this perspective, the centrally-funded universities have fewer worries as the planned enrollment slots of centrally-funded universities are normally “overbooked” with applications stemming from the general appeal of attaining elite higher education.

In the process of quota-setting, individual faculty members have different interests from a university’s admission bureaucracy. For the faculty, the quality of the student body is of central concern. A professor from a centrally-funded university revealed that students’ performance in the job market will impact their plans for the provincial distribution of enrollment quotas:

Every year, our faculty will propose an enrollment plan to the university admission office. When making the plan, we will consider the quality of students from every province based on our experience with students of previous groupings. For example, if students from Jiangsu Province performed on average worse than the others and could not successfully find a job after graduation, we might reduce the quota for Jiangsu next year. The university admissions office and the office of student career development are placed in the same room, they will exchange information about students’ performance in the job market (Interview 1).

Another professor from a centrally-funded university in Beijing shared similar views by adding the concern of regional disparities:

Our sociology department determines the provincial quotas strategically. For example, if we reserve three slots for students from Henan Province this year and realize only later that the three enrolled students have serious problems, we might transfer the quota of three slots to other provinces. Also, we probably will not give any quota to Shanghai, because Shanghainese students normally don’t want to leave Shanghai and study elsewhere. Even when we grant them quotas, they will not apply. It is a waste of a quota. Moreover, considering that non-Beijing students tend to stay in Beijing after graduation, we actually don’t want to give quotas to students from rural Western provinces (Interview 22).

Clearly, during the data collection process at local levels, there was a deep-seated geographical bias and interest dispersion in setting quotas. Depending on universities’ relations with provincial education bureaus, the quota allocation becomes a resource based on which interests of the two parties can be exchanged. Some second-tier universities in rich provinces even negotiated with educational bureaus of underdeveloped provinces to enroll their students who outperform at *gaokao* tests and fulfill the requirements of first-tier universities (Interview 28). By doing so, the second-tier universities ensure that the enrolled students from poor regions have above-average qualifications as their level of basic education is relatively low.

After local data have been collected and reported to the center, the annual quota plan will be designed jointly by the MOE and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) with the NDRC playing the dominant role in decision-making.<sup>21</sup> The central level is much more concerned with the macro-development of higher education; it aims to control the national enrollment aggregates based on the data collected from the localities (Interview 22). The national enrollment plan (including the total enrollment and provincial quotas) is drafted according to the national Five-Year-Plan for economic development and the Ten-Year Plan of educational development. The plan must be read and passed by the NPC (MOE 2017). In terms of the decision-making process for quota allocation, the NDRC and the MOE mainly take the following factors into consideration: the number of test-takers of each province, regional higher education capacity, regional equality, and national development strategies (ibid.). It is difficult to balance all of these factors in decision-making, as some work against others. In order to achieve regional equality, for example, some universities are forced to grant quotas to poor regions where students are less qualified. It not only contradicts the interests of these universities, but it also counteracts the national strategy of talent production.

Although the actual calculation of provincial quotas is confidential, one plausible assumption can be made: the provincial quota is proportionally correlated with the number of universities per province/region (which represents the regional higher education capacity). That is to say, if one region has more universities, it will likely have to enroll more students from other provinces. From Graph 4 below, one can clearly see the proportional relationship between the regional admission quota (blue column) and the regional university numbers (orange column). The MOE divides the country into six geographical regions: North China (华北), Northeast China (东北), East China (华东), South Central China (中南), Southwest China (西南) and Northwest China (西北)<sup>22</sup>. The quotas are allocated to each province based on previously collected numbers, but as Graph 4 suggests, small adjustments would have been

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<sup>21</sup> This author reviewed the admissions quota plans from 2010-17 and found that the admissions quota plan has been a consistent part of the National Economic and Social Development Plan (国民经济和社会发展计划总表). The plan is released by the NDRC and it guides quantitative targets for the development of all state-owned sectors. There is a sub-section within the NDRC which sets and controls the annual quantitative targets: 总量处 (the section plans the national sum of production, educational enrollments, exports, imports and etc.).

<sup>22</sup> Although the division of geographical regions is not officially announced, it is deliberately expressed in MOE's policy documents as evidenced by the geographical regions in the list of universities. The division has its origins in 1952 when quotas were allocated equally to the six regions.

deliberately made to balance the regional proportion. As one can see from the colored columns, the proportions (i.e., regional universities and regional admission quotas) are so similar that four distinct geographical regions (Northeast China, East China, Southwest China and Northwest China) exhibit differences less than one percent. Consequently, one might say that this is the most tentative correlation that one could provide based on an initial examination of the data.<sup>23</sup> Yet, while distributing the quotas, the choices of the center are actually quite limited. In the policy process, the center plays the dominant role in policymaking, although the control of the quotas seems to be the only instrument that it can apply to balance regional disparities. To be sure, regional equality ranks high on the policy agenda of the central government, but it does not necessarily mean that the center ignores the admission quality. It takes seriously the risk of mismatches between universities and students. As earlier interviews suggest, the universities and localities care more about the quality of enrollment and of student performance. In terms of regional equality, localities will fulfill the assigned targets handed down from the central level, but they will definitively not contribute beyond that point.

<b>Geographical Regions</b>	Provinces (Municipalities, Autonomous Regions)	Total number of universities/provinces	Total number of universities/ regions [percentage]	Admissions quota / province	Admission quota / region [percentage]
<b>National Total</b>		$\Sigma = 2,595$		$\Sigma = 3.253.900$	
North China (华北)	Beijing	91	<b>399</b> [15.38%]	47.800	<b>410.800</b> [12.62%]
	Tianjin	55		62.700	
	Hebei	120		149.800	
	Shanxi	80		97.100	
	Inner Mongolia AR	53		53.400	
Northeast China (东北)	Liaoning	116	<b>258</b> [9.94%]	143.800	<b>351.900</b> [10.81%]
	Jilin	60		97.400	
	Heilongjiang	82		110.700	
	Shanghai	64	<b>786</b>	68.500	<b>989.900</b>

<sup>23</sup> An econometric analysis of the data, especially a binomial probit regression analysis of the two variables, is neither presented nor suggested in this thesis.

East China (华东)	Jiangsu	166	<b>[30.29%]</b>	211.400	<b>[30.42%]</b>
	Zhejiang	107		136.000	
	Anhui	119		138.800	
	Fujian	88		97.200	
	Jiangxi	98		120.700	
	Shandong	144		217.300	
South Central China (中南)	Henan	129	<b>618</b> <b>[23.82%]</b>	207.100	<b>851.500</b> <b>[26.17%]</b>
	Hubei	128		153.800	
	Hunan	123		146.500	
	Guangdong	147		234.700	
	Guangxi Zhuang AR	73		85.800	
	Hainan	18		23.600	
Southwest China (西南)	Chongqing	65	<b>316</b> <b>[12.18%]</b>	86.700	<b>395.100</b> <b>[12.14%]</b>
	Sichuan	109		158.800	
	Guizhou	64		60.700	
	Yunnan	72		82.400	
	Tibet AR	6		6.500	
Northwest China (西北)	Shaanxi Province	93	<b>218</b> <b>[8.4%]</b>	13.400	<b>254.700</b> <b>[7.82%]</b>
	Gansu	49		61.100	
	Qinghai	12		10.000	
	Ningxia Hui AR	18		15.100	
	Xinjiang Uyghur AR	46		34.500	

**Note:**

Despite the regional distribution of universities, the ranking of universities and the distribution of the leading universities also account for the unequal development of higher education. Regarding the university ranking in China, please see Chapter 5.1.5.

**Sources:**

- Jiaofa [2016] Document No. 7: "Annual Admissions Plan of Higher Education 2016," available at: [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A03/s180/s3011/201605/t20160504\\_241872.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A03/s180/s3011/201605/t20160504_241872.html),
- Number of *gaokao* applicants per province: <http://gaokao.eol.cn/gkbn/>,
- MOE 2016e: List of National Higher Education Institutions (as of 2016)

*Graph 4: Geographical distribution of universities and quotas (by author)*

In fact, the previous analysis reveals not only the routine process of decision-making on the annual distribution quota, but also the different policy values upheld by the central and local

levels. In our historical review of admission policies, this author mentioned the oscillation of policy values between egalitarianism and elitism during the early period of the People's Republic. The value split eventually culminated in the outbreak of the Great Proletariat Culture Revolution where the focus of admission policy strictly followed the golden rule of egalitarianism. Since the economic reform, however, educational policies have been designed to serve the country's technological advancement and economic development, with policy values literally shifting to the other side: education for economic development (i.e. competitive elitism). Nevertheless, the side-effects of a series of admission policies and market-oriented policies have generated the problems of social stratification and regional disparity, turning the educational landscape back to the value split with growing voices demanding for equality and rural-urban balance. The quota system, which has always been functioning as a political instrument for the Great Unity, fulfills the needs of the CCP in maintaining solidarity and national collectiveness. Unless the state creates a new political instrument to serve this purpose, the centrally controlled quota system will likely remain.

### **3.2.2 Cultural legacies: Valuing education and test-oriented learning and teaching**

The previous section introduced the political legacies of a meritocratic system. In the following section, I continue with the cultural legacies. Different from its political legacies, which mainly affect state behavior in making admission policies, the cultural legacies exert a much wider and long-lasting impact on educational behavior in China. Here, I mainly demonstrate the cultural legacies that prevail in the *gaokao*-context: a culture that values education and test-oriented learning / teaching.

The practice of meritocracy has fostered a culture that values education and advocates exam-based selection. Rote-learning and teaching to the test (应试) are the direct results of this meritocratic culture, which, despite official criticism and discouragement, are being widely practiced from elementary to senior high schools in contemporary China. However, in its broader social context, these practices are the rational choices of Chinese parents determined to pave the road to success for their offspring. The reward of elite higher education can pay off, both in economic and social terms.

#### **Valuing education and seeking degrees**

For Chinese children, learning always has been an honorable endeavor. Teachers and parents become partners in working hand in hand to supervise children's engagement with daily learning. The continuous practice of hard learning reinforces the mentality of valuing education and extending its deepest impact to society. During my field trips to Zhejiang and Fujian Province, I discovered four villages where the outstanding performance of villagers in meritocratic examinations (both *gaokao* and former systems) was engraved on the golden placard in their ancestry temples. These four temples revived after the Cultural Revolution based on supports of the whole lineages, and with some modern developments, names, and photos of famous intellectuals and rich businessmen from the lineages were placed in specific positions in the temples.

As American author and law professor Amy Chua chronicled in her international bestseller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, if her family went on holiday, she always booked hotels with pianos in the lobby so her daughter could practice during the holidays. Serious musicians, she argued, require daily practice to maintain their skill level, even on vacation, given that every day one does not practice is a day that one gets worse (Chua 2011). Numerous Chinese poems and lyrics reinforce and promote such hard learning:

To enrich your family, no need to buy good land;	富家不用买良田
Books hold a thousand measures of grain.	书中自有千钟粟
For any easy life, no need to build a mansion;	安居不用架高堂
In books are found houses of gold.	书中自有黄金屋
Marrying, be not vexed by lack of a good go-between;	娶妻莫愁无良媒
In books, there are girls with faces of jade.	书中有女颜如玉
Going out, be not vexed at absence of followers;	出门莫愁无人随
In books carries and horses from a crowd.	书中车马多如簇
A boy who wants to become a somebody;	男儿欲遂平生志
Devotes himself to the classics, faces the window and reads.	五更勤向窗前读 <sup>24</sup>

Needless to say, learning and studying must be the priority during one's formative school years. There are many revolutionary parents who certainly prioritize things other than education. Yet,

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<sup>24</sup> The poem title was "encouraging learning (劝学诗)." It was written by Emperor Zhenzong of Song (968-1022). The target group of the poem was kids. In simple and plain language, it tells the benefits of hard work to encourage children to study hard. With good rhymes, the poem remains popular today.

it is a powerful belief that justifies parental behavior and constructs the fundamental principles for educational choice.

The culture of valuing education affects a variety of decisions. In the *gaokao*-context, the aim of education has been twisted by utilitarian purposes—passing exams and securing stable employment. It is reflected directly in parental investments in extracurricular activities and after-school cramming courses from birth. There is a famous saying in Chinese: “To lead the race right at the starting line (赢在起跑线).” The more the parents invest, the more educational capital children accumulate before competing with their peers at college entrance exams. There is one starting gate for these Chinese parents, and to be more precise, that gate is their child’s date of birth (or earlier). Because students compete with their peers, parents invest everything into their children’s education to ensure a fast start out of the gate. In this respect, housing prices are seriously affected. In urban areas, houses close to famous kindergartens, elementary and middle schools are quite expensive because public schools enroll students based on their household registration status. In mainland China, only purchased houses can guarantee an official registration of residence whereby rented houses do not count as permanent domiciles. In 2016, the Hong Kong Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) produced a documentary entitled “The Treadmill Runner (没有起跑线)” in which a mother-to-be complains about the distorted competition in education: “I have no other choice, [...] nowadays, the aim is not just to lead the race right from the starting line (赢在起跑线), but to lead the race directly from the uterus (赢在子宫里) (TVB 2016).”

Referring back to the policy suggestion by Tang Min and Zuo Xiaolei in 1999, they argued that the expansion of higher education would boost educational consumption because Chinese parents would be willing to diminish their savings to invest in higher education. The argument appeared given its reliance on the belief that all actors involved valued education.

### **What is to blame? Rote-learning or teaching to the test?**

Another significant legacy is rote-learning and teaching to the test. This learning method is continuously criticized for its limitation in generating students’ internal interests in science, and its negative impact on creativity; rote-learning does not necessarily limit one’s creativity and

curiosity, the fundamental problem of rote-learning is not the method per se, but rather the distorted motivations of the students who apply it to pass the exams.

In *gaokao* meritocracy, the desire to obtain high scores dominates simply because a ticket into a leading university is life-changing. As argued earlier, the result of the *gaokao* is directly linked to one's career enhancement and upward social mobility. Therefore, students learn to the tests and teachers teach to the test. Cunning techniques are deliberately taught at schools. Many students are able to pick the correct answer in multiple-choice questions without knowing exactly *why* it was the correct answer. A big part of the training focuses on getting the right answer and increasing one's score, as every student aims to get as high a score as possible to enter the leading universities. Interestingly enough, a dataset from experimental labs in 2014 shows that 85 percent of Chinese students chose their universities based on name-recognition and reputation rather than on personal interest. Thus, the classification of universities becomes the major factor for many students in deciding their preferences throughout the application process.<sup>25</sup>

Rote-learning alone cannot really harm on one's intellectual development, but once it is contaminated with cunning techniques for obtaining higher scores, its practice systematically undermines student curiosity in both the sciences and knowledge. It is an unpleasant outcome if getting higher scores and being accepted into leading universities are viewed as the only aim of education. Nobel Laureate Shuji Nakamura<sup>26</sup> argued along a similar vein: "The Japanese entrance exam system is very bad...[and]China, Japan, Korea are all the same. For high school students, their education target is to enter a famous university" (Normile 2015). He views it as the core reason why young student interest and curiosity are restricted and skewed towards exam-based learning (Pinto 2015).

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<sup>25</sup> I would like to thank my colleagues from the experimental economics group, Alexander Haering and Guanzhong Yang, who added my questions to their lab experiments at Chinese universities. It was a successful interdisciplinary collaboration from which we mutually benefitted. In the interest of transparency and full ethical disclosure, the raw data were not shared with me; I only received the pertinent responses to my own research questions.

<sup>26</sup> Professor Shuji Nakamura is the Nobel Prize winner of Physics in 2015 and he invented the blue LED, which was a breakthrough invention that enlightens the world. Prior to the blue LED, we only had the red and green LED. But only with the invention of the blue LED, one can combine all three colors to generate the white illumination. Without Professor Nakamura's achievement, the world will be in a different shade.

### **3.3 Education stratification: The globally shared problem of the higher education admissions system**

In modern societies, access to higher education has become the main cause of social stratification. Everyone is equal, but not equally successful in entering university. Controversies over admission opportunities exist in almost every modern society worldwide. Yet, the reasons behind admission stratification can be different from society to society because it is not merely an issue of the admission system per se, but also a complex set of social and political problems shaping and reshaping the institutional structures of distributed entrance opportunities among different social groups. This complexity accounts for the distinctive characteristic of admission policy that impacts both the policymaking and the implementation process.

#### **3.3.1 A short excursion: An international comparison of admission stratification**

Equality is incompatible with meritocratic selection and the ideal of becoming social elites for which everyone in society is actually pursuing. Different societies measure equality of university admissions based on distinctive indicators and categorizations of social groups. In Germany, for example, inequality of educational attainment is reported to exist between offspring from academic and non-academic families, and two German words *bildungsfern* (uneducated; lack of education) and *bildungsnah* (educated) were even coined to define these two groups. In his bestseller *Die Asozialen: Wie Ober- und Unterschicht unser Land ruinieren – und wer davon profitiert* (*The A-Social: How Social Upper Class and Lower Class ruin our Nation – and who is profiting from it*), Walter Wüllenweber reports that children from academic families in several federal states have six times higher possibilities to enter a *Gymnasium* (high school) than children from working-class families (Wüllenweber 2012:123). The major reason, Wüllenweber argues, is that the German educational system has a rival competitor—the social security system—in which German politicians pay much closer attention. The basic logic of German politics is to secure what one already has achieved, not to encourage further status aspirations. Thus, it was sarcastically summarized as: “*einmal unten, für immer unten – so hat sich Deutschland abgefunden*”<sup>27</sup> (Wüllenweber 2012:125).”

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<sup>27</sup> English translation for Wüllenweber’s summary: “Einmal unten, für immer unten—so hat sich Deutschland abgefunden (If you are at the bottom, you are forever there—this is the fact in Germany) (Wüllenweber 2012: 125).”

In the United States, the debate over university admission concentrates on whether enrollment opportunities are equally allocated by race and ethnicity. It is always a sensitive and sentimental issue if enrollment policies are contested in race-related terms. Following the political will of Michigan citizens, the state passed a law prohibiting race-based admission policies at state universities. To enroll students regardless of their skin color might sound fair and reasonable, but the reality has shown that without race-sensitive selection, the state universities in Michigan had proportionally enrolled much more students from white upper classes than other race groups (Supreme Court of the United States 2014: No. 12-682). The petition case soon developed into the debate over legitimized state prohibition of race-based admission. Judge Sotomayor expressed her deepest concern about prohibiting race-based enrollment policies:

Race matters because of the slights, the snickers, the silent judgements that reinforce that crippling of thoughts: “I do not belong here.” [...] This refusal to accept the stark reality that race matters is regrettable. [...] we ought not sit back and wish away, rather than confront, the racial inequality that exists in our society. It is this view that works harm, by perpetuating the facile notion that what makes race matter is acknowledging the simple truth that race does matter (Sotomayor 2014).

— Supreme Court of the United States (No. 12-682), Bill Schuette, Attorney General of Michigan, Petitioner v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration and Immigrant Rights and Fight for Equality By any Means Necessary (BAMN), et al. On Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit [22 April 2014]

Legally, the prohibition of race-based admission policies actually excludes race from the its selection criteria. The point here is not whether universities *should* apply race-sensitive policies, but rather to what extent the state *can* prohibit a university’s enrollment decisions.

The controversies of the German and American enrollment systems demonstrate that the educational stratification in university admissions is a cross-national phenomenon in modern societies, but the actual cause of this stratification is embedded in structural problems of each society impacting the distribution of enrollment opportunities in various ways. The cause of admissions inequality might even change in accordance with social development. For instance, with the wave of refugee families flowing into Germany, the education chances for refugee children will be a problem in the near future. Societies will develop in ways that one cannot precisely anticipate. Policy makers are limited to existing information about the future development of society. Yet, admissions policymaking requires a complex knowledge set to

produce a flexible institutional framework that allows a certain degree of agility and adjustment. The policy makers must be aware of the wide range of variables that are key to admissions outcomes and they must be tough to choose some and ignore others.

### **3.3.2 College admissions stratification in China: The path toward education elites and structural changes of the social origins of the Chinese education elites**

Unlike Germany and USA, Chinese university enrollments are run under a national selection system with individual universities unable to admit students independently.<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, enrollment outcomes are correlated with the national policies that define the selection principles and shape the enrollment criteria. As stated previously, every unequal admission system is unequal in its own unique way; the inequality of China's admissions system is mainly the result of two sets of problems. One set of problems originates from the macro-level barriers present in the rural-urban divide and regional disparity. Such inequality is intensified by another set of the micro-level problems affecting the human capital outcome (including family income and intergenerational transmission of education attainment). The social origins of education elites in China has become more diversified and fragmented from 2004 to 2014. As shown in the beginning of this thesis, the current development implies an increasing dominance of the privileged classes such as the nouveau riche, or the academic, or other cadre families. Some scholars have put it in even more extreme terms: "the Chinese university is a rich, Han, urban, male club, where poor, minority and rural female students are systematically under-represented (Wang, et al. 2013:456)." The discontent and disappointment about the unequal selection system has grown drastically in Chinese society. In the following

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<sup>28</sup> Since early 2010s, some leading universities were allowed to admit up to five percent of their total enrollment quotas independently. That is to say, these universities could organize independent tests and interviews (in addition to *gaokao*) to evaluate a student's scholastic aptitude. The system faced intense controversy for its non-transparent selection criteria and the biased recommendation mechanisms that were tied to complex *guanxi*-networks among the leading universities, high school principals, and relevant interest groups. A study in 2014 indicates that the independent selection system only favored privileged groups, i.e., socio-economically advanced families, academic families, etc. (Liu et al 2014: 41). In actual fact, the independent system even opened university staff to potential corruption charges. The system was later abolished in 2014, but then reinstated through significant reform measures installed by the state to ensure greater transparency and fairness. Nevertheless, only five percent of the regular admission quota remains. The independent admissions tests must be scheduled after the *gaokao* tests. Leading universities all set test dates concurrently so that students could only choose one university for independent selection. Otherwise, the elite universities would have had a higher risk of wasting their minimal independence should they have issued the admissions letters to students who sit multiple tests at various universities.

section, I elaborate on these two sets of problems respectively by displaying how they systematically construct the inequality in Chinese university admissions.

### **The macro-level: Rural-urban divide, regional disparity and institutional barriers**

In China, uneven distribution of educational opportunities begins from kindergarten straight to higher education. The rural-urban divide and regional disparity are two major causes for the overall education inequality. Furthermore, the institutional barriers derived from the *hukou* (household registration) system constructed the artificial division of insider- and outsider-students,<sup>29</sup> whose opportunities of educational attainment vary widely. Despite every student being evaluated equally by unified criteria, the outcomes demonstrate an ever-growing gap between students from different regions and different families.

The access to different higher educational opportunities are highly structured by the home origins of the students, with rural students being substantially disadvantaged (Wu 2014:48). A study in 2015 reveals that rural youth from poor counties were seven to eleven times less likely to access any college and elite project 211 colleges than urban youth respectively (Li, et al. 2015). In this context, the rural-urban divide is not so much related to the *hukou*-occupation of agricultural (农业家庭户口) and urban residence (城镇户口 or 非农业家庭户口), but to the discrepancy of educational quality distinguishing the rural from the urban. Generally speaking, students who attend elementary and middle schools in rural areas or less developed townships can only obtain a less qualified education in comparison to their peers in urban areas. The progression from middle school to high school already excludes a large portion of rural students. High schools are mostly located in cities (at county-level or above), i.e. even those who work hard enough and successfully get enrolled in the high schools, they would have to move to the cities and for their families, it means additional spending for the three-year secondary education. Although the higher education expansion in 1999 has increased widely the opportunities of entering colleges, the gap of rural and urban representation at universities

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<sup>29</sup> The differentiation between insider- and outsider-students is made based on their *hukou* registration (jurisdiction). In the *hukou* system, two indicators decide the individual access to various social services, including pension, social security, health care: (1) the occupation as agricultural (农业家庭户口) or urban (非农业家庭户口/城镇户口); and (2) the registered jurisdiction (户籍所在地). In terms of educational access and the higher education opportunities, the registered jurisdiction plays the most significant role, as it is closely related to the official *xueji* of each student (an elaboration of *xueji* is presented in the following part).

persists. Indeed, the more prestigious the universities, the lower percentage of rural students (Li 2013:318). Obviously, the expansion of higher education is not followed by a progression to equalization given that the universities are differentiated hierarchically. The expanded slots at leading universities have been predominantly occupied by students from socially prestigious families, whereas students from rural poor families have been over-proportionally enrolled by only lower-tier universities with less-qualified educational resources (Ding 2006:32). Furthermore, the quality of education is strongly dependent on the level of regional economic development. In general, economically advanced regions on China's eastern coastline can provide better educational resources and larger admission quotas for local students. Moreover, the rural-urban divide in Shanghai and Guizhou Province exerts distinctive impact on students' higher educational opportunities. Students who attend rural schools in Shanghai have a better chance to enter good universities, for the education quality in rural Shanghai can be better than even urban Guizhou. Moreover, Shanghai has 64 universities (among them 22 are leading universities), which enroll a large number of local students, while Guizhou has also 64 university but only one elite university.<sup>30</sup> In the course of domestic immigration, the *hukou* system causes additional institutional barriers for children from migrant families whose permanent residence is in provinces other than their registered jurisdiction (户籍所在地). These students encounter the *xueji* problem. The *xueji* system, or the student-school coupling registration system (学籍制度)—a direct *hukou*-derivative<sup>31</sup>—is bound to one's place of household registration. That is to say, if migrant workers were to enroll their children in urban schools in other provinces, these schools could not offer an official *xueji* for them; they could

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<sup>30</sup> For more elaboration on unequal regional distribution of universities, see Chapter 5.1.5.

<sup>31</sup> The student-school registration system manages students' personal profiles within their entire educational development until they enter the job market; students' identity is registered at one defined school at the jurisdiction where their household is registered. Each student receives a *xueji*-number (学籍号) as soon as he or she matriculates. The number is generated based on one's personal ID, through which the original *hukou*-place is to identify, e.g., people with Shanghai-*hukou* has their ID number starting with 310. In normal cases, students study in the province where their *hukou* locates, then their *xueji*-number will be characterized by the initial G and followed by the personal ID. If the students are still at younger age and do not have a personal ID, their *xueji*-number starts with the initial J, but once they receive their official personal ID, the *xueji*-number will be changed to G-series. And in those cases, the *xueji*-numbers indicate an official and permanent *xueji* at the school within the jurisdiction of the relevant provincial educational authorities. In cases of inter-provincial school transfers, students' *xueji*-number will be downgraded to temporary *xueji*, and the *xueji*-number will be respectively changed to the initial L (standing for 临时). And the provincial educational authorities of the *hukou*-province will have to cooperate with their colleagues in the province, where the students are temporarily living and going to school. With a temporary *xueji*, students will be asked to go back to *hukou*-province to sit the entrance exams.

only admit the children as students with temporary residency (借读生). This institutional barrier is unbeatable, which means that the rural children living in urban areas can finish their formal schooling up to senior high school, but they have to go back to the *hukou* province to sit the *gaokao* exams.<sup>32</sup> The eligibility for *gaokao* exams is dependent on one's *hukou* and *xueji* registration. As previously noted, the province is considered as one unit to which the admissions quotas are allocated. With the number of migrant children drastically growing, the quota calculation becomes ever more complex and disputed. At the level of data-collection, it is controversy whether the migrant students shall be counted in the *hukou*-province or the province where they are temporarily living and studying. For all provincial educational authorities, it's better to keep the number of test-takers as high as possible, because the MOE will then grant the province with higher admissions quotas. The potential conflict between the two provincial authorities cannot be underestimated.

Although the *hukou* status does not directly undermine one's opportunity to enter university, indirectly, the *hukou* system develops a distinctive institutional environment for students in competitive selection. The institutional barriers based on *hukou* affect the migrant students' decision on spatial mobility. The aspirational will of rural families is to acquire a good and qualified education in urban areas, so that children may be prepared for the *gaokao* exams, but they had better not go beyond the provincial boundary. Otherwise, the children would be forced to sit for the *gaokao* exams. Nevertheless, the test content is different from the materials that the children have studied in urban areas. One could argue that urban students, if they were to transfer schools from home province to another, would face similar institutional barriers. Furthermore, their *xueji* will also be turned into temporary ones and the institutional barrier is not just targeting at rural students. While it is true that domestic migrant families must overcome this institutional obstacle in their own way, the fact is that rural families struggle. The quality of basic education is relatively poor. If families were restricted by the *xueji* system with only

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<sup>32</sup> Since 2012, rural students have been allowed gradually to sit for tests in cities other than their *hukou*-residence, as the central government's new policy urges local provinces to experiment with institution-building by turning migrant students into eligible test-takers on par with urban students (Guobanfa 2012). This policy remains in the experimental stage across several provinces, and the regulations differ widely from province to province; in some provinces and municipal cities, local governments face strong resistance from urban parents who bluntly oppose sharing the provincial admissions quotas with rural students without local-*hukou*.

limited choices for public schooling, they could only attend less qualified schools. The result: being less prepared for the *gaokao* tests.

In terms of basic education, the central government invests heavily in affirmative action measures designed to improve rural education and to alleviate poverty. Nevertheless, as multiple volunteer teachers reported, the scarcity of educational resources does not seem to present a real challenge to rural education. Rather, the real challenge is far more complex and frustrating: high rates of school drop-outs (with rates sometimes over 70 percent), the absence of family education, growing dependence on donations, and state subsidies (Sun 2017). These myriad problems stem from individual by rural parents whose conviction is that each family member must contribute to the monetary income of the household (i.e. , that each child is considered as a member of the labor force who shall either work on the farm or in the city at higher wages). As the volunteer report shows, although the compulsory education is free and all miscellaneous fees waived (including books, school lunches, etc.), many parents are still not convinced by the possible return on education and are skeptical of its overall value (ibid.). According to Dr. René Trappel, Chinese peasants increasingly depend on diversified income streams, forcing them to think rationally about the use of their limited assets (Trappel 2016:82-84). With this behavioral logic prevailing in many rural households, government policies and financial support may have limited impact.

### **The micro-level: Cultural reproduction and intergenerational educational transmission**

In June 2017, right after the *gaokao* papers were read and the results were released, journalists across the country immediately identified the students who obtained the highest scores of each province, chasing after them for interviews. The No.1 student in Beijing came from a diplomatic family with two parents who had served in Chinese consulates worldwide. The student spoke to the media:

It's getting more and more difficult for rural children to obtain the access to elite universities, [...] Those children (like me) who come from middle-class families don't have to worry about the livelihood. The parents are both intellectuals and we grew up in metropolitan cities such as Beijing, therefore, we can enjoy a lot of things that are not available for rural kids. [...] It's just that I could make every step on my educational development solid. Thus, the test result just naturally turned out to be good (Sohu 2017).

This interview immediately went viral. Again, it touched a nerve; the words were both candid and realistic. As someone who benefitted from the privileges embedded in the selection system,

he bluntly exposed the biased educational conditions for children from different family backgrounds and social groups.

The interview reflected the general perception of higher education stratification in China; that students from more socioeconomically advantaged families maintained their advantage by obtaining a higher quantity and quality of education than others (Yeung 2013:54). In sociological studies of elite formation and reproduction, scholars usually use factors like educational attainment and political status to define the so-called “socioeconomically advanced families” and to explain the mechanisms of elite reproduction (Lü 2016:120). Through the quantification of such variables, some scholars have demonstrated a strong positive correlation between parental aide and the outcome of university access for the child (Li 2003; Liu 2014).

In the Chinese context, parents’ political capital is valued by the cadre-status. Chinese researchers characterize this group as “cadre elites (干部精英) (Zheng 2009:70-71)” or “system elites” (体制精英) (Lü 2016:119)”. James Lee and Liang Chen’s study shows that children from cadre families comprise the largest portion of the enrolled student body at Soochow University (Liang and Lee 2012:109). The study also identifies that after the reform and opening up, most of the cadre-parents are actually managers from state-own enterprises and not officials from CCP or state lines (ibid.). Li Hongbin and his colleagues have further identified the extended effect of the cadre-status on children’s wages. They find that the cadre premium is as large as 14.5 percent after controlling for other family attributes (Li, et al. 2012:519).<sup>33</sup>

### 3.4 Summary

Chapter 3 has so far elaborated on the so-called “content factor” of innovation in university admission policy. From a functional perspective, admission policies may be categorized as distributive public policies; policy changes that aim to allocate university slots among a given population. The university admission system is to select students for higher learning. The nature of this selection is to differentiate students according to predetermined criteria and to distribute these slots (public resources) to qualified candidates. The entry into universities is positively correlated to one’s social status. Therefore, the institutional foundation for university

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<sup>33</sup> In this context, the endogeneity of the variable of educational attainment cannot be underestimated. As pointed out in earlier paragraphs, the Chinese cadres mostly have stunning academic records. Therefore, the cadre-status already implies the above-average educational attainment of the parents.

access plays a key role in the formation of education elites in society. In fact, admission policies decide the rules of allocating opportunities of higher learning and awarding elite status. Differently from other public policies (e.g., public housing or medical services) that manage the distribution of tangible resources to the public, admission policies deal with the allocation of intangible resources. Moreover, the recipients are involved in the distribution processes and they are even able to manipulate the distribution results by gaming the selection tests. One could argue that admission policies have a much wider impact on society than other public policies. From the state perspective, a functioning admission system directly influences the quality of the future labor market—something that is paramount to economic development. The selection rules must be made in a legitimate fashion to fulfill different interests and needs at both the micro- and macro-levels. From the candidate's perspective, the selection rules are bound to personal education attainment and upward social mobility. For the state, the selection rules can be viewed as a tool for finding talent that can provide sufficient knowledge and skills to enhance China's economy. Therefore, the discretion space for admission policy is constrained by its wider social and political impact, as the needs of different vested interests shall be taken into consideration in the policymaking and implementation process.

As reviewed in this chapter, there have been swings in admission policymaking due to the conflicting selection principles: meritocracy and egalitarianism. Traditional meritocratic values have been vigorously challenged since the Communist takeover. In order to restrain the replication of cultural and educational elites, meritocratic selection principles were eliminated and replaced by a recommendation system that fundamentally shifted the social origins of the student body. The *gaokao* system based on meritocratic values was revived in the course of China's reform and opening-up policy; and with the new ideological twist, Communist-driven egalitarian principles were abandoned in favor of fresh meritocratic values that changed the institutional foundations of the *gaokao* selection system. "Merit" is now defined by scholastic aptitude and intellectual ability that is essentially assessed by the *gaokao* tests. To be sure, the CCP's egalitarian values still manifest in affirmative action programs; and the centrally-funded universities take on greater responsibilities in enrolling rural and poor students. For the implementers at the university admissions office, the quota system reduces the agility and flexibility in the admission processes, despite the fact that some officers can make use of personal ties and regional advantages to obtain more qualified students. The central decision-

making behind quota distribution takes place in the MOE and NDRC. The administrative procedures of quota setting are carefully managed to avoid any discretion at the local level.

The growing social debate over admission inequality not only challenges the legitimacy of the *gaokao* system, but also represents a potential source of instability in Chinese society, which is perceived as a risk by the central leadership. As explained above, “stability first” is the general principle of China’s policymaking since the 1989 student movement. The current situation of the admission system implies an intensified tendency of elite building and cultural reproduction, which might be in the eyes of the central leadership an unpleasant result. The political sensibility of admission equality remains high. It also explains why the discretion space of the university officers and high schools are compressed in coping with admission rules.



## **4 The Making of Policy Innovation: Tracing Policy Intent, Envisioned Changes, Affected Interest Groups and Intended Implementers**

This chapter starts with the crisis that drove policy innovation in the *gaokao* system. In the following section, the educational policymaking system in China will be briefly introduced by highlighting the key actors in top-level policy innovation processes. The third section of this chapter illustrates the trigger to policy innovation, the emergence of policy alternatives, and how specific ideas survived. The author concludes with a smoking gun test by drawing inferences based on observations elaborated in the policymaking process.

### **4.1 A pressing problem in China's economy: Talent shortage and mismatch of human capital**

As defined in our theory chapter, policy innovation contains the development of new ideas or concepts that are triggered by clearly defined problems of the government (see Chapter 2.1.1). The policy innovation for the *gaokao* system in 2014 was driven by the shortage of a creative labor force and the mismatch of human capital that were perceived as latent crises eroding economic growth and economic development in China. The link that relates educational policies and economic growth is explained by human capital theory and labor economics.

Through education, one acquires knowledge and skills that have economic value (Schultz 1961:3). “Human capital” was coined to refer to all worker attributes that potentially increase productivity in all or some productive tasks (Acemoglu 2009:359). Just as accumulation of personal human capital produces individual economic (income) growth, so do the corresponding social or national aggregates (Mincer 1981:1). These accumulated capabilities are developed through formal and informal education at school and at home, and through training, experience, and mobility in the labor market (*ibid.*). Moreover, the aggregate function of human capital generates a national pool of knowledge that stimulates innovation and technological progress and thus boosts the factors of production required for economic expansion.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, technological progress itself is endogenous in the process of

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<sup>34</sup> The contribution of technological innovation to economic growth has been widely researched by economists. In *The Rise and Fall of American Economic Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War* (Princeton:

economic growth, given its pace and direction are influenced by the institutional environment that secures its development (Acemoglu, et al. 2016:61). The educational system, as the primary channel of nurturing creativity for technological advancement, constitutes a major part of such an environment. Looking at governmental intervention in the educational environment offers a new angle to explain the endogeneity of technological progress in economic growth. In this context, educational policymaking plays an important role in shaping the institutional environment of formal schooling that impacts the human capital accumulation and economic growth, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

After more than three decades of rapid expansion, China's economy finally converged with other middle-income economies (Nabar and N'Diaye 2013:3). In 2008, China overtook Germany to become the world's third largest economy (Seager 2009). Two years later, it leapfrogged Japan to become the world's second largest economy (McCurry and Kollwe 2011). The booming economy arguably benefited from the so-called "demographic dividend"—a growth pattern in the tradition of Arthur Lewis' thesis whereby undeveloped economies advance by reallocating their surplus labor from low-productivity sectors (e.g., agriculture) to high-productivity industries while wage increases remain at the subsistence level (Lewis 1954:189-191). Nonetheless, China's extensive growth model, which relied on labor-intensive exports and technological catch-up, approached the so-called "Lewis turning point." The pool of rural surplus labor drains and real wages rise. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that the Lewis turning point will emerge in China sometime between 2020 and 2025 (Das and N'Diaye 2013:1). The estimate mirrors more anecdotal reports and media coverage that China's relatively cheap labor is no longer cheap (Loyalka 2012) and that the labor shortage will occur more frequently, despite lucrative wage increases offered by employers (Xinhua 2012). Yet, some economists argue that China's stunning double-digit growth is unsustainable, as GDP growth ostensibly slowed since 2008.<sup>35</sup> The productivity

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Princeton University Press, 2016), author Robert J. Gordon illustrates how the United States carved out its technological frontier during the special century of "Great Inventions" in order to achieve its own vigorous postbellum economic growth (2016: 2). He applies total factor productivity (TFP) to measure the pace of innovation and technical progress, a measure of how quickly output grows relative to the growth of labor and capital inputs (*ibid*).

<sup>35</sup> The global financial crisis in 2008 likely accounts for some of China's economic deceleration as the import demands from advanced industrial economies dropped significantly. Nevertheless, the fundamental problems of the country's new millennium growth model would also have emerged regardless of these external shocks. In an open economy, as domestic labor costs grow, greater pressure will be placed on corporations to move operations

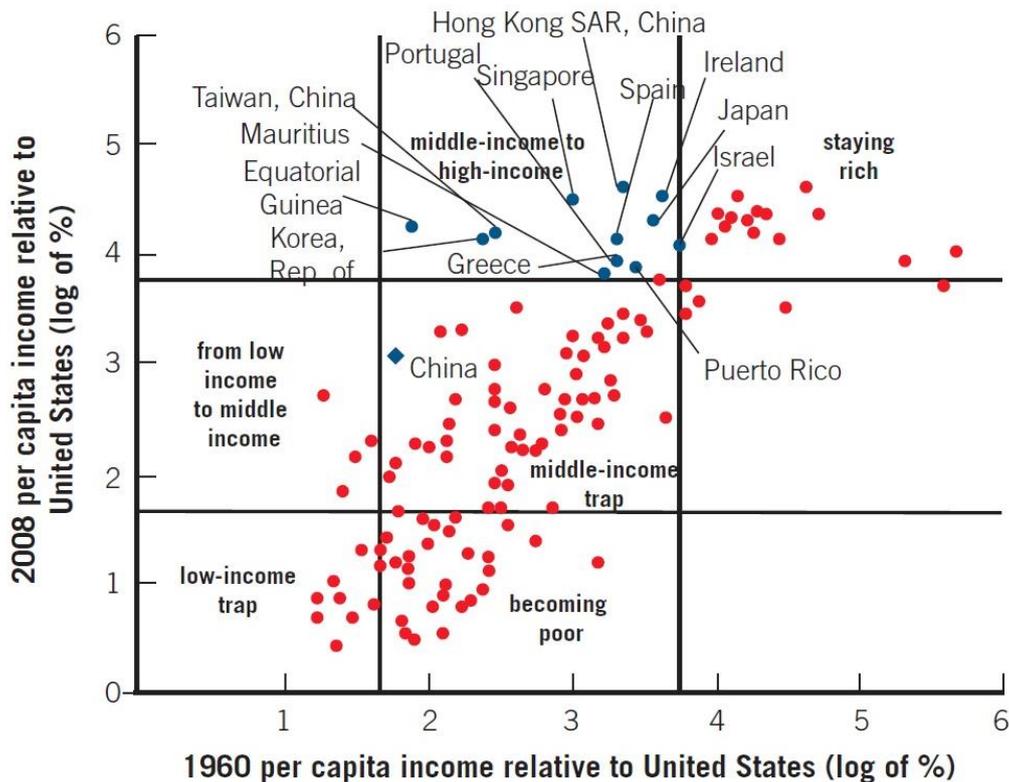
slowdown signifies that the return on both physical and human capital inputs is diminishing. In order to avoid a middle-income trap, the Chinese government pledges a “new normal” in the development era in which the economy shall achieve sustainable long-term growth through the expansion of services, domestic consumption, and domestic innovation (Zhao 2015).

To realize economic restructuring and to pave the way towards an innovation-based economy, China aims not only to create a highly skilled labor force, but also effectively allocate it to improve overall productivity. In addition, China’s seeks to expand the aggregate capacity for technological innovation. In this sense, education, in support of human capital accumulation, would need timely adjustments to achieve the desired productivity increases. In particular, the education system would need to be measured in order to improve labor capability and the distribution of human capital.

Whether China will eventually escape from or arguably remain in this middle-income trap is unclear, but regardless of outcome, its fate likely depends in part on its educational policy management to improve upon human capital accumulation and upon its labor distribution. Given the 101 middle-income economies recorded in 1960, only 13 achieved high-income status by 2008 (see Graph 5 below). The problems and tasks awaiting China will be challenging. The World Bank suggests that the middle-income trap is often characterized by a misallocation of talent (*ibid.*: 5). In line with this proposition, empirical results reveal that the Chinese economy has struggled with the misallocation the human capital in recent years. Despite human capital growth through higher education expansion since 1999, TFP continues to decline (Whalley and Zhao 2010:29-30). Demographically, in the period ahead, China’s labor market might face problems resembling other industrial economies, including rising labor costs and unemployment (frictional and structural) that arises from skill mismatches between growing university graduates and corporations requiring more specialized skill sets (Lee, et al. 2013:21).

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abroad (i.e., “hollowing-out” or “de-industrialization”) in an effort to protect profit margins and rates of return via lower relative personnel costs. For annual GDP growth rate data, please see data from the World Bank: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG>



Graph 5: Countries transcending the middle-income trap [Source: Agenor, et al. 2012]

In their risk analysis for the 2018 global economy, the *Economist Intelligence Unit* (EIU) ranks China’s economic downturn sixth in the top 10 global risks (see Graph 6 below). To avoid the middle-income trap, China must overcome the hurdles of talent shortages and labor mismatches. Surely, the CCP is aware of the risks during this putative transition period. However, risks also contain embedded opportunities. Given that the core ideology of the state regarding educational development was (and is) a grand meta-narrative that highlights the nurturing of talent for national strength and economic prosperity, a further reform thrust in higher education is likely. The *gaokao* test bridges education and higher learning. Functioning as both talent selection and an allocation system, it shapes the broad environment of formal schooling by setting the rules of competitive study body selected by scholastic aptitude and personal ability in quantitative terms. It can be potent way of teaching and learning, eventually influencing the outcome of human capital accumulation itself in China. A policy intervention in the *gaokao* system immediately affects the teaching and curriculum settings in secondary education and the overall educational environment itself, but the effectiveness of such policy can only be assessed after years or even decades.

## Top 10 global risks in order of intensity

Rank	Intensity	Scenario
=1	15	Prolonged fall in major stockmarkets destabilises the global economy
=1	15	Global trade slumps as US steps up protectionist policies
=2	12	Territorial disputes in the South China Sea lead to an outbreak of hostilities
=2	12	Global growth surges above 4%
=2	12	A major cyber-attack cripples corporate and government activities
=3	10	China suffers a disorderly and prolonged economic downturn
=3	10	There is a major military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula
=3	10	Proxy conflicts in the Middle East escalate into direct confrontations that cripple global energy markets
4	9	Oil prices fall significantly after the OPEC deal to curb production breaks down
5	5	Multiple countries withdraw from the euro zone

This table highlights The Economist Intelligence Unit's top 10 global risks, ranked in order of intensity. Risk intensity here is measured on a 25-point scale, and is a product of the probability of that risk taking place and the potential impact it would have on the global economy.

*Graph 6: EIU's estimation of top 10 global risks [Source: EIU 2018: 4]*

Against this backdrop, the Chinese government pressed to reform its university admission system, eventually carrying out innovations by 2014. The macroeconomic crisis perceived as a problem in need of immediate political intervention spurred the central government into action. The accumulation of human capital, in particular the production of a qualified and skilled labor force, remains the concern of the central leadership. In the following section, I continue to elaborate on the empirical evidence supporting innovation in China's education policymaking by focusing on the content factors that influence the discretionary space for the implementers.

## 4.2 Key actors of admission policymaking in China

As I suggested in Chapter 2, policy innovation for the test and admission system in 2014 was a top-level design. A central education policy can be issued by any one of a plethora of actors: any number of departments or bureaus located within the MOE, by the MOE itself, by the State Council or by the CCP. As one might expect, important policies require the endorsement from higher power hierarchies of the policymaking system, which consequentially raise the degree of policy authority and enhance local engagement in implementation.

The educational policymaking in China entails rigid bureaucratic procedures and flexible interactions among various functioning bodies in the state administration. The decision-making relies heavily on the CCP leadership, reflecting the nature of an authoritarian party-

state. The institutional setting for education policymaking comprises of a hybrid system of over 20 organizational units at the central level (see Graph 7 below). Actors from these organizations play distinctive roles in the policymaking process where authority itself is not equally divided among all actors concerned. The MOE, for example, cannot decide on the yearly admission quota alone because the NDRC is more powerful and needs to approve in advance that the quota is in line with China’s national economic development (see also Chapter 3 for further details on the quota system).



Graph 7: Institutional setting for education policymaking in China (by author)

This section mainly focuses on the key actors in the 2014 admission policy innovation process: the Central Leading Group for Deepening Reform (CLGDR), the State Council, the MOE, the National Leading Group for Educational Reform, the Advisory Commission for National Education Reform, and the Advisory Commission for National Education Examinations. The other departments were peripherally involved in policymaking, but they had played a comparatively insignificant role by only dispatching representatives to the deliberations.

**Central leading group for deepening reform**

In support of policy innovations of a top-level design, the central leadership accomplished institution-building through the establishment of the CLGDR at the Third Plenum of the XVIII Central Committee of the CCP (CCPCC 2013). As the central decision-making body for public policy, the institutional unit was set up in the functional structure of the CCP—which implies not only a recentralization of decision-making power, but also a reinforcement of the CCP’s power in policymaking itself. When the central government deals with critical policy issues, the CLGDR intervenes in the decision-making to limit the parameters of (in)action (Chai 2015). The Group is headed by the CCP General Secretary Xi and commenced on the 22 January 2014, revealing greater influence of the Politburo members in the CLGDR (Xinhua 2014c). The members oversee six special reform teams: economy and ecological cultivation, democracy and rule of law, culture, social and public services, CCP development, and discipline inspection (ibid.). Altogether 60 reform programs passed at the plenary session of the XVIII. Central Committee (Heberer 2017:14), six special teams contributed to this accomplishment. The programs are supposed to be completed by 2020 (ibid.). As the core functional body, the CLGDR controls policymaking by setting concrete guidance for policy innovation and implementation. The admission policy innovation was included as part of the No. 42 program “Deepening the comprehensive reforms in the area of education (深化教育领域综合改革) (CCPCC 2013).”

### **National leading group of educational reform**

The National Leading Group of Educational Reform (国家教育体制改革领导小组) is a coordinative and administrative actor directly headed by the State Council. It was established to implement reforms in the “Outline of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 (国家中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要 2010-2020)” (Xinhua 2010). Altogether, 20 state organizations are selected as members of the Leading Group (see Graph 7 above). The executive office of the Leading Group was established within the MOE and later transformed and institutionalized as a separate unit: the Department of Comprehensive Reform (教育部综合改革司) (Jiaorenting 2012). The Leading Group plays the most important role in the policy formulation of educational issues since 2010. As an overarching governmental unit, it is responsible for an array of educational reforms whose

outcome will be evaluated by 2020. In terms of the testing and admission system, an advisory commission was created to provide expertise in the policy design.

### **Advisory commission for national educational examinations**

The Advisory Commission for National Educational Examinations (国家教育考试指导委员会) was established on 19 July 2012. It reports the results of any investigation directly to the Vice-Premier Liu Yandong (CRI 2012), who is in charge of the general educational issues in China. According to internal circulars, the Advisory Commission is the direct supervisory organ of the National Leading Group for Educational Reform (Guojiaozi 2012 No. 1). The chairman of the Advisory Commission is appointed by the Leading Group (Jiaogaiban 2012 No. 4: Article 4). All members of the Commission are selected and formally appointed to their positions by the Leading Group, too (ibid. Article 7). In total, there are 26 commission members and 31 assigned experts (Liu 2013:366-367). As an advisory unit affiliated to the National Leading Group, the operational expenditures of the Advisory Commission are funded by central government revenue (Jiaogaiban 2012 No. 4: Article 12).

The major responsibilities of the Advisory Commission include:

1. Conducting fieldwork for key issues regarding educational examinations and offering advice and suggestions accordingly;
2. Deliberating on major policies relating to educational examinations and providing advisory recommendations; and
3. Drafting reform plans for educational examinations and giving operational guidance to the experimentation sites for the reform (ibid.).

The commencement of the Advisory Commission was on 19 July 2012 in Beijing, where experts received their certificates of official appointment from the vice-premier. At an interview with a commission member, one expert pointed to a picture on his office wall—a snapshot of Vice-Premier Liu conferring red certificates to the commission members. The participation of the experts in central policymaking is perceived as an honor, although most experts perceive their influence to be quite limited (see further details in later sections).

### **State council and the MOE**

As the highest executive organ in China, the State Council is responsible for the management of the national economy, of urban and rural development, of educational issues, of diplomatic relations, of national defense, of civil affairs and of any and all further issue areas (Constitution 2004). The plenary meetings and the executive meetings of the State Council are the main decision-making procedures in the State Council. The plenary meetings shall be composed of all members of the State Council and the executive meetings shall be composed of the premier, vice-premiers, state councilors and secretary general (ibid.). The members of executive meetings are simultaneously *dangzu* (党组 party group) members of the State Council.<sup>36</sup> With this institutionalized embeddedness of party presence, State Council policymaking is in full control of the CCP. The premier takes on the function of the Secretary of State Council's *dangzu*. Thus, the educational policies which are released in the name of the State Council must have been discussed and passed either at plenary meetings or executive meetings of the State Council, with the *dangzu* dominating the decision-making at the executive meetings.

The MOE is the direct ministry under the State Council, and it is responsible for the policymaking and implementation in the education sector. Under the Xi-Li Administration, the MOE *dangzu* defines its responsibilities in four categories<sup>37</sup> and the underlying keywords are: innovations, law-based administration, comprehensive reform, harmony and stability, and justice and equality—all comprising the major aspects of MOE's policy engagement during the administrative period, until a new governmental leadership is to be formed.

The MOE releases ministry-level regulations and policies that are implemented by the lower subordinates in the educational bureaucracy. Depending on the content of these

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<sup>36</sup> According to the individual profiles of the ministers, vice-ministers and state councilors, it is to be identified that they are all *dangzu* members of the State Council. Their profiles can be found at the official website of the State Council: <http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/index.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> (1) to accelerate the functional transition of educational administration, to promote the management and service innovations, and to continuously improve the quality of educational management; (2) to enhance the supervision of the education sector by optimizing the law-based administration, self-disciplines, public supervision and participation mechanisms; (3) to coordinate and manage the educational affairs in the country, to draw out plans, policies, guidelines for educational reform and development, to draft the bills of legal regulations of relevant issues, to manage and standardize the overall administration of the educational system, to deepen the comprehensive reform in educational areas, to promote the scientific development of national education system, to carefully and properly deal with contradictions of all types, and to optimize the administrative mechanisms responding to incidents and events to safeguard the harmony and stability of the educational system; (4) to lay more emphasis on public educational services, to improve the overall public service system in the education sector, to optimize the distribution of educational resources, to enhance justice for a more equalized system of public education (Jiaodang 2013).

regulations and policies, different departments and bureaus under the MOE will be entrusted with policymaking. Generally speaking, the Department of Comprehensive Reform (教育部综合改革司) has been the key actor for policymaking of educational reform; it is in charge of everyday administrative duties of the National Leading Group for Educational Reform, e.g. drafting policy documents based on Leading Group's goal setting. Additionally, the National Center for Education Development Research (国家教育发展研究中心) is involved in policy drafting, too, when required by the MOE leadership (Interview 26).

The State Council, the MOE, and its subordinates are the major issuers of educational policy documents. The Working Regulations of the State Council (国务院工作规则) stipulates that the executive meeting of the State Council discusses and approves policies and regulations, and the ordinances or statutes must be signed by the premier (Guofa 2013 No. 16: Article 37 and 44). Policy documents released in the name of the State Council (abbr. coding: *guofa*) must be reviewed by the vice-premiers (or relevant ministers) who are responsible for the respective issues and signed by the premier before official announcement. Policy documents released in the name of the General Office of the State Council (abbr. coding: *guobanfa*) must be signed by the General Secretary of the State Council (Guofa 2013 No. 16: Article 44-45).

The Working Regulations of the MOE (教育部工作规则) stipulate that the policy documents released in the name of the MOE *dangzu* must be signed by the Secretary of the MOE *dangzu*. Policy documents released in the name of the MOE must be signed by the vice-ministers (or relevant leaders) who are responsible for the policy issues. Policy documents released in the name of the General Office of the MOE must be signed by the head of the General Office or the leaders in charge (Jiaodang 2013 No. 38: Article 32-33).

Accordingly, the official coding of a policy document informs the policy issuers and approvers. More importantly, it reveals up to which bureaucratic level the policy has been deliberated and who has eventually approved and signed it for official release. From this perspective, the making of a policy generates subtle effects on the implementers and affected groups, who perceive the significance of a policy's binding effect based on the issuers and approvers' bureaucratic level.

### **The policy innovation under investigation**

This thesis deals with policy innovation of a top-level design by way of Opinions of the State Council on Deepening Reform to Examination and Admission System (国务院关于深化考试招生制度改革的实施意见) (Guofa 2014 No. 35), which was officially announced on 3 September 2014 by the State Council and MOE.

According to the *Working Regulations*, it is an educational policy released by the State Council (coded as *guofa*) and thus must have been signed by Premier Li Keqiang. As a policy beyond the ministerial level (MOE), it involved a much larger group of governmental officials in the policymaking process. Moreover, an examination of the media coverage of the CCP reveals that this policy proposal landed at two high-level meetings of the CCP Central Committee before it was signed by the premier. On 18 August 2014, the CLGDR held a working meeting where the proposal was deliberately discussed by its members (Xinhua 2014b). Ten days later, on 29 August 2014, at the meeting of the CCP Politburo, the content of the proposal was discussed again and eventually passed by a majority of the Politburo (Xinhua 2014a). Up to this point, it is clear that the policy under investigation is a top-level designed innovation belonging to the 60 reform programs initiated at Third Plenum of the XVIII. CCP Central Committee (CCPCC 2013; Guofa 2014).

The policy draft had to zigzag up the power hierarchy to the top-level tiers until an ultimate decision could be made. In reality, every transfer of a policy draft from one decision-making venue to another leads to a new round of debates and modifications. If the officials and policy actors cannot reach an agreement at one level, they would pursue a higher-level endorsement. It is a rational action to unload the risk of making mistakes by passing it onto the next higher level, until no higher level can be attained. It implies that there have always been contesting opinions on the policy shift during the decision-making process. The friction of ideas account for the postponement of a given policy launch. These judgements seem to comply with the conducted interviews with policy actors that are elaborated in the following sections.

### 4.3 The process of policymaking for the *gaokao* admission system: A timeline approach

#### 4.3.1 Kick-off and the great debate over *suzhi* education

It is widely reported that the current reform attempts for *gaokao* can be traced back to the great debate over *suzhi* education (素质教育) in 2005 (Guo and Wang 2014; Zhang 2014). The assumption was later confirmed during my interview with an educational expert in Beijing, who participated in the policymaking process of the new higher education test and admission policy in 2014 (Interview 27).

In June 2005, He Dongchang<sup>38</sup> signed a petition to then-President Hu Jintao in which he vigorously criticized the distorted ways of teaching and curriculum planning at schools (Yu 2010:42). In the petition, He listed all kinds of bizarre phenomena of test-oriented education: many schools ignored the central call to reduce the burden of the children; they replaced physical education, music, painting and art courses with Chinese, English, and mathematics just because they are official test subjects of the *gaokao* examination; many high schools seek to increase the rate of university enrollment by twisting the teaching plans and focusing only on the content that would be tested in *gaokao* (ibid.). Because the aim of attending leading universities is shared by students, parents, and high schools alike, these perplexing teaching methods were somehow legitimized. With deepest disappointment and concern for China's educational future, He Dongchang called for a national effort to solve serious problems through *suzhi* education.

Like a stone skipped across a still pond, his petition soon caught the center's attention and generated a rippling effect throughout China. Having read the petition letter, Hu Jintao immediately wrote to his colleagues:

Comrade Changchun, Comrade Yunshan, Comrade Zhili and Comrade Zhou Ji<sup>39</sup>: 'the issue of "suzhi education" raised by Comrade He Dongchang is very important. It is true that we

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<sup>38</sup> He Dongchang (何东昌) was the minister of education from 1982-85. Before He was appointed as minister, he worked as deputy secretary of the CCP Commission of Tsinghua University. His efforts to rebuild the educational system after the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution was widely recognized in China.

<sup>39</sup> Hu Jintao's instruction was addressed to four central leaders who were responsible for education-related issues: Li Changchun (李长春), then-standing committee member of the Politburo (2002-12); Liu Yunshan (刘云山), then-Minister of Publicity Office of the CCP Central Committee (2002-12); Chen Zhili (陈至立), then-Councilor of the State Council (2003-08); Zhou Ji (周济), then-Minister of Education (2003-09).

cannot solve the problems by relying merely on the schools and the educational bureaucracy. We shall take his suggestions into consideration and find the solutions based on systematic field research.’ (Yu 2010:43)

Hu Jintao initiated systematic research that received solid support from within the Party. They mobilized their responsible governmental organizations to participate in the fieldwork and policy consultations to search for solutions (Guo and Wang 2014:26). The great debate over *suzhi* education turned into rigorous campaigns that were mainly managed by the Publicity Office of the CCP Central Committee and MOE (ibid.).

Both internal and external organizations of the educational authority-initiated consultation fora, discussions, and research fieldwork to find a solution. Despite the official research teams of the MOE, key media groups and opinion leaders encouraged social debates to exchange ideas and to collect reform suggestions (ChinaEducationDaily 2006). As to be expected, a growing number of public voices emerged, with growing opposition groups emerging and advocating that learning to the test cannot be entirely denied. The test competition based on test scores remains legitimate among the population. The fundamental disagreement lies in the biased value perception of education—or more precisely—the *suzhi* education.

The official research team for *suzhi* education was promptly established under the leadership of the then-Councilor Chen Zhili. It comprised of educational officials, bureaucrats, experts, and research institutions who were assigned for different research topics. For the higher education test and admission reform, scholars of an ongoing research project at Xiamen University were called upon to assist in the fieldwork (Liu 2009:399). Educational bureaucrats from the Department of the College Students Affairs of the MOE also joined the local field trips (ibid.: 9). The research team started in Shanghai, which was at the frontier of education reform and invited all the high school principals and heads of the district-level educational bureaus to articulate their opinions and suggestions in the promotion of *suzhi* education in high schools and to improve the higher education admission system (ibid.). Altogether, 11 discussion fora were organized in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou where 100 educational experts, educational bureaucrats, university principals, heads of elementary schools, and high schools had participated in the deliberative meetings to exchange ideas on how the test and admission system shall be changed (Zhang 2014).

### 4.3.2 Critical juncture I: The failed implementation of reform attempts in 2008

The first critical juncture in admission policy innovation occurred in 2008. The MOE attempted to reform the *gaokao* system but failed in the actual implementation. However, this was a critical turning point for the process “from policy intent to actions” of the policy innovation in 2014 because the intent of the 2008 reform concretized and translated into policy goals that established the foundation of the consecutive policy innovations for the *gaokao* reform.

While the great debate of *suzhi* education was emerging in society, educational authorities accelerated the process of policy formulation. After an investigation by the experts, a field report titled “A Study of Higher Education Test and Admission System” was submitted to the MOE (Zhang 2014). The Department of College Student Affairs of the MOE called on a national-level meeting on the issue of higher education admission reform (Liu 2009:9). The report mainly advocated three reform thrusts: (1) introduction of qualification tests of secondary education, which shall function as school leaving qualifications; (2) establishment of students’ individual profiles to record their comprehensive abilities and social activities; and (3) creation of new admission channels (Zhang 2014).

The policy makers of the MOE were convinced by this report. The Department of College Student Affairs issued in January 2008 a policy document for the *gaokao* reform, which to a great extent reflected the suggestions made by the education experts (Jiaoxue 2008). In the policy, the provincial educational bureaucracy was called on to introduce the high school proficiency tests and to create multi-dimensional criteria to evaluate students’ abilities (ibid.). The aim was to change the admission rules of *gaokao* to influence the test-oriented education at high schools. By adding new selection criteria (such as comprehensive abilities and social activities) in the admission system, high schools’ attention would be raised on the development of students’ moral character and social engagement.

Nonetheless, the local response to this reform policy was discouraging, with only few provinces (including Shanghai and Zhejiang Province) engaged in limited pilot programs (Interview 27). The mere ignorance from the localities was regarded by the center as absolute failure to implement the policy as “a drop in the ocean (石沉大海)” (Guo and Wang 2014:26). The failed implementation reveals the insurmountable obstacles and resistance within the educational bureaucracy. The external factors from society further discourage local

governments to respond to central changes because the affected groups (such as students and high schools) remained skeptical to the changing rules of college admission that might have reduced the chances of entering good universities.

A policy document issued by a department-level unit can rarely motivate the lower levels to do what the center intends, especially when their ignorance will not cause any negative consequences and penalties. In provinces where nationally unified test papers are applied for *gaokao*, the implementation can only be realized through inter-provincial negotiation and collaboration—which did not happen. The few provinces that responded to the policy by experimenting with new curriculum combinations and evaluation criteria were those possessing independent authority to test proposition (i.e., if the teaching curriculum and selection criteria were changed, the provincial level examination authority could make corresponding changes independently.)

Although this reform policy failed to be implemented at the local level, its content can be viewed as the foundation of the 2014 policy innovation. Several reform attempts in the policy document in 2014 had already been included in the 2008 policy for local implementation, including the introduction of qualification tests of secondary education and the comprehensive evaluation system. It is thus interesting to see how the failed policy changes in 2008 ascended on the list of policy alternatives later and survived in the complex process of policymaking.

Moreover, the disappointment of failed implementation in 2008 did not stop reform attempts for the university admission system because the policy intent lingered: generating talents for a successful economic transition.

The MOE and the central leadership studied the failure and learned from it. The reason for local ignorance was multifold. The localities might have practical considerations and uncertainties about the policy changes because minor changes in higher education admission rules could produce chain reactions within the rest of the education sector. The action groups in the education sector represent different interests that remain at loggerheads. A policy solution that benefits one group, can easily do harm on another. The fragmentation of interests is the largest challenge for decision makers in finding a balanced policy solution that works for all. Therefore, the political center felt obliged to intervene and play a charismatic role in articulating reform in a more specific fashion so that every unit across the educational bureaucracy is

alarmed to do the job seriously. Education experts (this time mainly university professors) were soon summoned to Beijing to make a new blueprint education reform. The expert group was led by Vice-Premier Liu Yandong. Before they officially began the policy draft, participants were asked to sign the non-disclosure agreement (Interview 30). After the *gaokao* reform in 2008 had failed, the educational bureaucracy changed their strategy and turned to work on the central blueprint for reform.

The experts soon after devised a new blueprint with the CCP and the State Council launching the Outline of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 (国家中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要 2010-2020) and immediately established the Leading Group for Educational Reform (Xinhua 2010). In terms of the admissions system, the outline reiterated the central intention of improving *suzhi* education and generating talent to meet the development needs of the country (MOE 2010b). The admissions system would be reformed to (1) offer students multiple chances for university selection; (2) diversify the test formats depending on the type of colleges and universities; (3) introduce the assessment of students' comprehensive abilities; and (4) enroll students through multiple channels.

For the decision makers in the higher education sector, a “to-do list” was literally created:

- establishing the Advisory Commission for National Education Examinations;
- formulating the reform policy for the test and admission system; and
- guiding the policy experimentation of the new reform (ibid.).

It was clear that the to-do list was made for deficit policy implementation in 2008. Its formulation was concrete and viewed as a direct order from above. Against this backdrop, the MOE felt the pressure to find new approaches to realize the intended policy change. In fact, the output of the to-do list constituted the major part of admission policy innovation in 2014. It was not difficult to discern that the three tasks therein implicitly reflected the three stages of the policy cycle: agenda-setting, policy formulation, and policy implementation. Although it was not explicit in the document, the implicit connotation was that a new plan must be designed, policy makers must not fail, and its survival guaranteed until at least being tested.

### 4.3.3 Critical juncture II: Experts' involvement and the failed policy proposal in 2011

The second critical juncture evolved in MOE's second reform attempt in 2011. However, the second attempt already failed at its initial proposal due to internal conflicts and disagreements over alternatives. Sensibility and complexity were again revealed in the Chinese context, as argued in Chapter 3. The obstacles for *gaokao* reform also presented themselves in disagreements at the central level. While the 2008 failure revealed the problem of local ignorance in policy implementation, the 2011 failure uncovered the contradictions in policymaking. Therefore, the second failure led to the establishment of the Advisory Commission for National Education Examinations; it revealed the central ambition to use expertise to identify different interests in society and balance the contradictions based on top-level calculations.

The previous section elaborated on the release of the national outline and the “to-do list” for the *gaokao* reform. The outline again evoked both political and social sensibilities within the existing problems in the university admission system—long criticized for its uneven distribution of admission quotas across the provinces and its institutional barriers undermining the admission possibilities for rural applicants. In response, the MOE called upon the National Education Working Conference on 24 January 2011, at which all educational bureaucrats, officials, and heads of universities gathered to talk about the concrete responsibilities of each bureaucratic unit to realize the goals of the Ten-Year Education Plan. The *gaokao* reform received much greater attention in society; and the vice-minister of MOE ambitiously promised the audience to make a new policy for *gaokao* by the end of 2011 (Du 2011). It not only set a clear deadline to urge the educational bureaucrats to look for new solutions to existing problems, but also sent out an official message to the affected groups of the *gaokao* system that their voices were heard and the government would take action to deal it. With the official deadline being announced, over 80 experts nationwide were again called upon to conduct more sophisticated and comprehensive local fieldwork, so that a deeper understanding of the existing conflicts and contradictions in the *gaokao* system could be acquired (Interview 27, 30 and 36). The experts formed 16 research groups, with each group responsible for one research theme. The fieldwork was conducted in six provincial territories: Jiangsu Province, Shanghai, Zhejiang Province, Liaoning Province, Chongqing, and Sichuan Province (Interview 27). In the course

of the local fieldwork, the provincial educational bureaus and commissions offered assistance to organize local meetings with provincial bureaucrats, high school principals, and representatives of teachers and students (ibid.). Unlike previous attempts, the experts raised more concrete questions by revealing potential policy changes at local discussions. They wanted to sniff out local attitudes towards and potential resistance against the intended changes. Experts' assessments of local conditions were reported back to the center for decision-making (Interview 8, 27, and 36). By virtue of its diversity and disparity, local responses and attitudes varied widely. Local doubts and uncertainty about potential policy changes were caused by locally specific factors, and in many cases, contrasting voices could be heard even within one province.

As a result, the MOE was unable to keep its promise. After the failed policy implementation in 2008, the second attempt in 2011 failed at formulation due to internal debates within the MOE creating more conflicts than consensus. The MOE leaders held distinctive opinions on the alternative changes that were suggested by policy experts (Guo and Wang 2014). Policymaking resulted in stalemate, as the promised deadline approached and the MOE leaders (and decision makers) could not reach agreement. The policy proposal failed to obtain a majority pass at the MOE ministerial meeting (Liu 2013:374). Internal disputes over policy changes remained unresolved (Guo and Wang 2014:26; Zhang 2014). Indeed, *dangzu* members could not reach a consensus.

In 2012, the policymaking for the *gaokao* reform experienced a “gap year.” In comparison to previous endeavors, the educational bureaucracy was restrained in announcing major policy shifts because the general political atmosphere was sensitized for the 18<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress at the end of the year.

Since the MOE was unable to keep its promise to carry out the policy for the *gaokao* system by 2011, it understood the problems in the decision-making process. In fact, MOE's internal disputes over the draft reflected the uncertainty about local responses and the potential consequences of the alternative changes. The policymaking thus resulted in stalemate. Referring to the “to-do list” in the “Outline of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020,” the MOE was already too late in shortening the list. With the date of the 18<sup>th</sup> CCP Party Congress approaching, the Advisory Commission

for National Educational Examinations (国家教育考试指导委员会) was established on 19 July 2012.

The establishment of the Advisory Commission signaled that *gaokao* reform was back on the agenda. The commission members once again started to organize local field trips with experts. They only went to one field site due to the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, while the rest of the fieldwork was conducted intensively in the first half of 2013 (Interview 27). The experts were allowed to join the policy deliberations only by official invitation of the MOE, but most experts were not welcome at internal meetings with the key decision makers. Experts' influence on central decision-making was therefore constrained. As one expert acknowledged, "some kind of impact was expected, but I guess very limited" (Interview 8).

#### **4.3.4 Critical juncture III: Policy formulation, the CCP deliberation and the final approval by the Politburo**

The third critical juncture evolved in the course of policy formulation and CCP deliberation. The key event was Liu Yandong's visit in Shanghai in August 2014, when Shanghai and Zhejiang educational bureaucrats reported the preliminary plans for the experimentation. The event not only revealed the overlapping of policymaking and implementation, but also uncovered the central government's control in local implementation.

After the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, some experts were called upon to draft the policy in Beijing, and they were housed in a small hotel in front of the main headquarter of the MOE in Damuchang Hutong (Interview 27). The experts provided fieldwork reports, minutes of deliberation meetings and policy suggestions, while the National Center for Education Development Research (NCEDR, one of the 33 affiliated organizations of the MOE), was the main policy drafter for the *gaokao* reform. The working team for the policy draft was gradually narrowed in the course of content development and concretization of the policy changes. Even researchers from the MOE's internal personnel, who contributed the policy texts for the main guidance, were not able to join the ever-smaller circle of decision-making (Interview 26).

Nothing suggests that external experts were invited to join the process of policy formulation. Actually, the State Council owns a think-tank for policy research and formulation—the Development Research Center (DRC)—which is responsible for almost all

fields of central policy formulation, except educational policies. As a former DRC researcher said, “the MOE always makes policies on their own, but nobody will possibly know how to deal with the *gaokao* system (Interview 2).” Thus, it can be discerned that the circle of *gaokao* policy formulation was quite closed and people outside this circle could barely acquire any information about how the policy drafts were made and modified.

Evidence implies that the formulation of central policy innovation overlapped with the implementation at the local level. In the central policy formulation, Liu Yandong had already called on a meeting in Shanghai, where educational authorities from both Shanghai and Zhejiang had to attend to present their preliminary plans for the *gaokao* reform (Interview 38). As one interviewee revealed, she was satisfied with the plans in Shanghai and Zhejiang. The educational authorities proceeded with their experimentation plans. This piece of information implies that the experimentation and implementation procedures had started at a much earlier stage than the official release of the central policy innovation. One educational bureaucrat from the Zhejiang Province told me that the educational authorities in Zhejiang had been engaging with the reform programs way before the experts’ fieldworks and local deliberations (Interview 32). It was a causal turning point that led to the final approval of the central policy innovation, as the center was able to control the scope of changes and pre-confirm the feasibility of the implementation.

Several days after Liu’s visit to Shanghai, the Politburo held on the 29 August 2014 executive meeting, where the 25 Politburo members deliberated the modified policy draft and approved it for consecutive implementation (Xinhua 2014a). At the meeting, the CCP Politburo clearly formulated the requirements and detailed the assignments for both central and local bureaucracies to ensure effective policy implementation. First, the Politburo emphasized the six goals of the reform policy: 分类考试 (differentiation of test settings by type of higher education institution), 综合评价 (comprehensive and broad student evaluation), 多元录取 (diversification of admission channels), 促进公平 (promotion of equality), 科学选才 (scientific selection of talents), and 监督有力 (effective supervision). In essence, the composition of these goals build up an envisioned blueprint of the *gaokao* system that fulfilled the core political needs of the CCP in upholding its political legitimacy. These goals included nurturing creative intelligence for a successful economic transition, equalization of university accesses for the maintenance of

socialist ideology, and a more transparent and effective *gaokao* administration for the accountability of the party-state. The parallel phrases with four-characters served as the main working principles that guided the educational bureau in the implementation process. Second, the CCP highlighted concretely the key tasks: (1) the admission quotas were to be distributed more equally, with quotas increasingly shifted to relatively higher populated Western regions and provinces; (2) the key-point universities were to enroll more students from rural areas; (3) an optimized high school proficiency test with a standardized student comprehensive assessment mechanism; and (4) effectively monitored admission procedures (*ibid.*). Although the CCP did not set up exact quantitative goals for these tasks, it already identified concretely the processes in need of direct alteration. Each task was bounded to the responsible bureaucratic units that had to cooperate in the implementation. The discretionary space for the implementation was thus narrowed through the concretization of the tasks that would be completed by intended bureaucratic units. Finally, the CCP urged the MOE and relevant departments to design the matching policies that would further concretize how the policy changes would be carried out. They would serve as implementation instructions for the local bureaucracies, universities, and high schools.

In fact, the final approval of the CCP Politburo facilitated a right timing for the official launch of the top-level designed policy innovation. On 3 September 2014, only five days after the executive meeting of the CCP Politburo, the State Council unveiled the policy innovation for the *gaokao* reform (Guofa 2014). In retrospect, it had taken almost 10 years to achieve a policy thrust in the *gaokao* system. Triggered by the great *suzhi* discussion in 2005, the process of policymaking was trapped in stalemate several times. Despite the fact that the policy intent of the central leadership remained consistent, the content of the policy had been deliberated and modified by decision makers from different bureaucratic units and party organizations in the hierarchical system. The disputes over the potential policy shifts accounted for the delays. In the next section, I elaborate on the alternative changes (i.e., the intensely debated content of the innovation.) Although disagreements over the policy changes still exist among various actors, the top-level endorsement by the CCP Politburo effectively expedited the process and forced the educational bureaucracy to comply. The dominant role of the CCP had been decisive in the last phase and its active involvement literally accelerated the *gaokao* system reform.

## **4.4 Evolution of central policy content: Disputed policy alternatives and how they survived in the policymaking process**

This section focuses on the policy changes suggested by various actors in the education sector. The alternative shifts were debated at multiple venues, including in media reports. Throughout the process, the proposed changes in the *gaokao* system received both political and social criticism due to their impact on individuals and on society as a whole. Hereafter, I introduce the four most controversial changes that survived the process. The analysis sheds light on how experimental site fights were made. The content factors of the policy will be systematically elaborated to measure the impacts on the discretionary space and the implemented actions.

### **4.4.1 Alternative 1: Introducing the high school proficiency tests into *gaokao* grading system**

In the course of policymaking, the most debated alternative was the introduction of the high school proficiency tests (高中学业等级考试, hereafter: HSPT) into the *gaokao* grading system (i.e., the test results of the HSPT would be partly added to the final scores for competitive university selection). The *gaokao* test results constitute the other part of the final scores. This alternative change was significant because it would have shifted fundamentally the whole organizational procedure of the testing authority. Moreover, it forced high schools to transform existing curriculum and teaching arrangements to match the new combinations of test subjects in the HSPT. A ripple effect of this magnitude for the affected parties was foreseeable and was noted throughout local fieldwork by experts. Hereafter, I elaborate on these alternative changes and illustrate why the envisioned changes faced local reluctance.

#### **Functional extension of the high school proficiency tests**

High school proficiency tests existed for decades. Yet, unlike the *gaokao* tests, this testing system functioned as a de facto qualification exam that assessed whether a student fulfilled the high school graduation requirements (高中毕业). That is to say, the exam results were not (and are not) counted in university selections. In this sense, the high school proficiency certificate in China is different from the *Abitur* in the German education system, which functions not only as a qualification test to confer secondary school graduation diplomas, but also a matriculation test of sorts for university admissions.

Precisely because of this clear distinction between the proficiency tests and the *gaokao*, exam difficulty of the two qualifications varied widely—with the proficiency tests being much easier. Normally, the proficiency tests took place months before the *gaokao* so high school graduation diplomas could be conferred. The organization of the proficiency tests remained a provincial matter (i.e., the provincial educational bureaucracy possessed the autonomy in managing the secondary education qualification tests) (Interview 27). Since the test results were not counted in university selection procedures, the high school students and teachers did not treat them as part of a competitive test system. They paid much more attention to the *gaokao* exam that aimed to distribute students according to their competitive scores.

Obviously, the alternative change aimed to alter this situation by making full use of both HSPT and *gaokao* testing systems for competitive selection. In this sense, the function of the HSPT was literally extended. In the new admission system, the HSPT would not only be a qualification test for high school graduation diplomas, but also a matriculation test for university selection.

### **Envisioned difficulties and local reluctance**

In plain language, the functional extension of the HSPT literally intended to introduce a “little *gaokao*,” as the scores of selected subject tests would be calculated in the total score for university selection. For students, this functional extension meant more competitive tests for which they would have to make additional efforts. For the high school administrations and teachers, the new HSPT would affect the existing curriculum and teaching plans. For the educational authorities, this change meant various and sundry organizational rearrangements and interdepartmental adjustments. Consequently, the experts aimed to determine if the affected local groups would support the change and would be willing to engage with the potential problems in its implementation.

Prior to local field trips, the experts already had expected that the inter-provincial gaps in education quality would lead to local resistance. At one internal discussion, some MOE officials suggested that the proficiency tests should be standardized nationally. However, this suggestion was immediately vetoed by the other actors who opined that the provincial disparity in basic education was too large for a unified examination (Interview 27). It may seem reasonable to standardize the proficiency tests at the national level (i.e., every student cross-

regionally being asked an identical set of questions), but with the huge disparities in basic education, a standardized test would likely favor those competitive individuals with superior resources and privileges. In this context, the policy makers again confronted the long-held problem of “unity with diversity.”

In fact, the standardization of tests was already controversial for the *gaokao* exam; selected provinces were granted autonomy to propose independent tests. With the introduction of proficiency tests into the *gaokao* system, the same question arose again: Whither national standardization? Officials and experts alike frequently referred to an old Chinese saying—“long divided, must unite; long united, must divide” (分久必合，合久必分)<sup>40</sup>—to illustrate the paradox of China’s proposed test standardization. When the *gaokao* was reinstated in 1977, there was only one national standardized test for each subject. However, many local educational authorities realized the regional disparities in educational quality requiring independent measures suitable for local students and curriculum settings. By 2006, 16 provinces and municipalities were granted autonomy to propose province-based tests (WuhanEveningNews 2016). However, local propositions were soon confronted by strong opposition regarding fairness and justice. In response to the controversy, a few provinces were deprived of the right of independent propositions and they had to return to the national standardized tests (Zheng, et al. 2015). In experts’ view, the pendulum between division and standardization seemed to be an unbending rule in China.

When debating the standardization of HSPT at local levels, the swinging pendulum was already anticipated by experts, but they had identified one new factor for local hesitation: the diversity within individual provinces. At local hearings, the bureaucrats, teachers, and high school administrators neither supported nor opposed this policy alternative, but they expressed their reluctance and uncertainty in various ways. As one expert shared with me regarding his fieldwork experience in Sichuan:

When we were in Sichuan Province and discussed the introduction of high school proficiency tests with locals, their reactions were extremely diverse. If one does not come from Sichuan,

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<sup>40</sup> This phrase derives from the Chinese historical novel *Three Kingdoms*. Different versions of the English-language translation of this novel are available. I prefer to use the Moss Robert translation, see Guanzhong, Luo. *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*. Translated by Moss Robert. London, England: University of California Press, 1991.

one probably does not know the huge disparity in educational quality and students' aptitudes within the province. It is impossible to introduce provincially standardized proficiency tests for all high school students. The minority regions, including Liangshan and Aba autonomous prefectures, traditionally organize their school-graduation tests independently. If we wanted to introduce provincially standardized tests at all cost, we would have to reduce the test's difficulty, otherwise no one from the minority regions could graduate. A standardized proficiency test at the provincial level was already unreasonable, not to mention a standardized test at the national level (Interview 27).

The concern from Sichuan Province is representative of provinces nationwide with a higher percentage of ethnic minorities. The quality of basic education in these regions could not be improved in a matter of days and the high schools in such regions had different priorities, such as reducing the high school dropout rate and developing extra Chinese language curricula for students whose native language was not Standard Mandarin (Schnack 2016:234-238).

In the current system, the proficiency tests are simply used to earn high school graduation diplomas and the provincial educational authority can propose independent tests for ethnic minority regions and other parts of the province. As the tests are not competitive, and because the Han-students possess on average a better basic education, students can acquire their high school graduation diplomas despite relatively more difficult tests. Once the test scores are counted in the total scores for university selection, the game changes; it then becomes about real competition and achieving higher scores. One could probably envision the situation that all students would shift their household registration to minority regions so that they could take advantage of easier versions of the proficiency test and achieve higher scores to compete with their peers. With this story being told, it is clear that the potential difficulties of this policy change originate not only from the inter-provincial disparities, but also the intra-provincial diversity in education quality.

#### **4.4.2 Alternative 2: Abolishing the disciplinary dichotomy and ensuring students' individual selection of secondary test subjects**

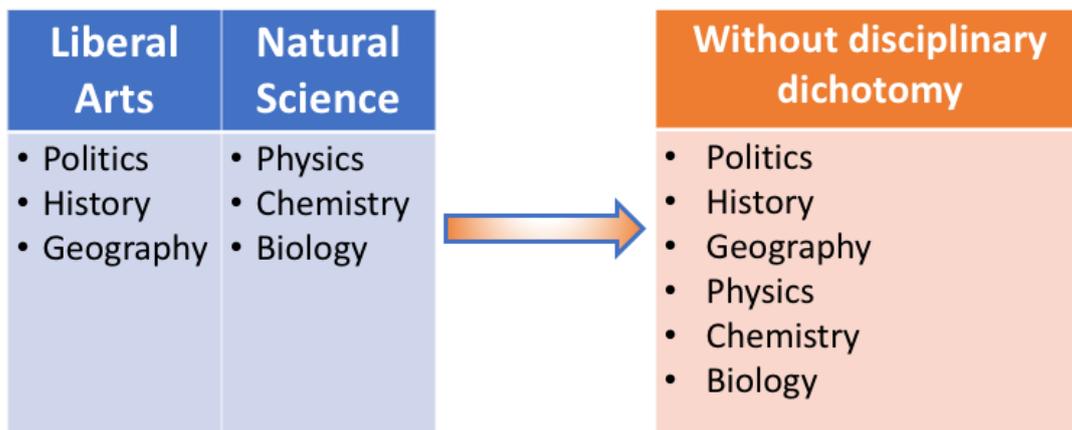
The second alternative is actually a consequent change that aimed to facilitate the new functional extensions of the HSPT. This change needed to be implemented on a par with the HSPT and it would have a direct impact on the high schools, teachers, and students, who sit for the university entrance exams in (and after) 2017. Generally speaking, the HSPT would take part of the function of the *gaokao* exams, and the students will be free to select three test subjects for the HSPT exams, whose grades would be counted in the total scores of the *gaokao*. The

tests of the three selected subjects would be completed before the *gaokao*. For the June-dated *gaokao*, only three primary subjects (Chinese, mathematics and English) would be tested (Guofa 2014).

Under the current *gaokao* system, students are divided into two academic groups: liberal arts (文科班) and natural science (理科班). Students have to choose their academic preference between these two groups in the eleventh grade.<sup>41</sup> Once the individual selection is complete, these two groups are taught and trained in distinctive ways, so that they are generally prepared for the entrance exams. This bifurcation of students' academic strength has been institutionalized well in both test and admission regulations in China. For the *gaokao* examination, students have to take two types of tests: (1) main subject tests that are obligatory for all, including Chinese, mathematics and English; and (2) secondary subject tests that depend on students' individual disciplinary selection. The blue column in Graph 8 below shows the disciplinary division between liberal arts subjects (politics, history and geography) and natural science subjects (physics, chemistry and biology). Based on this division, liberal arts students are tested in Chinese, mathematics, English, politics, history and geography. Natural science students are tested in Chinese, mathematics, English, physics, chemistry and biology. In the rational sense, high schools and students would maximize the learning efficiency and effectivity by only focusing on the subjects that would be tested in *gaokao* (i.e., liberal arts students would probably forego learning physics, chemistry and biology, as these subjects would not be tested in *gaokao*. Thus, they become irrelevant). Therefore, the noxious consequence of this academic division is students' immediate loss of interest in the irrelevant subjects to the *gaokao* exams. Moreover, this unhealthy learning strategy is supported by parents, school teachers, high schools, and the booming market of cram schools.

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<sup>41</sup> Regarding the time of students' academic division, there are small variations across regions. Yet, the general principle is that students and teachers would have enough time to adjust teaching plans suitable for academic selection (i.e., the teaching curricula and learning strategies would be deliberately designed for two groups of students, respectively).



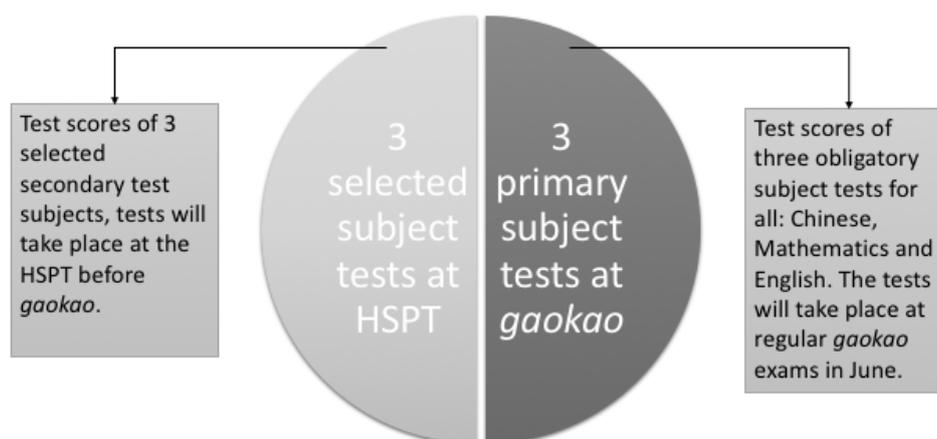
Graph 8: From disciplinary dichotomy to Individual selection of test subjects (by author)

Aiming to alter the course of biased learning and to promote a more well-rounded education, educational authorities and experts suggested the dissolution of academic groupings. Neither the students nor the test subjects would be divided. As the orange column of Graph 8 above shows, with the academic division being abolished, every student could arbitrarily select three subjects out of six secondary test subjects.

From the student's perspective, this regulatory change would lead to two major shifts: (1) for each student, there could be  $C_6^3 = 20$  possible combinations of the test subjects; and (2) students would be allowed to combine liberal arts with natural science (not possible under the current system). In this sense, students would be given greater freedom in choosing and combining subjects of interest. The three selected subjects would be tested only at the HSPT, and the three primary subjects (Chinese, mathematics and English) would be tested as usual at the *gaokao* in June (Guofa 2014; Jiaojier 2014c). The HSPT scores of the secondary subject tests and the scores of the primary subject tests would then be added together for the competitive selection of university entrance (see Graph 9 below).

Thus, this alternative change can fulfill the central intention of promoting a well-rounded education and interest-driven teaching. Nevertheless, it has triggered enormous local complaints. While experts discussed this policy alternative with the localities, complaints arose immediately from the educational authorities as they had to pay for the extra training costs for the teachers and facilitate all the infrastructural improvements that would have been needed for the implementation. In view of the high schools and educational bureaucrats, the change involved risks that challenged the administrative abilities of the schools and the authorities. At

deliberations in Zhejiang and Shanghai, local bureaucrats complained about two envisioned difficulties: (1) the high costs for the coaching and training of the teaching staff and the affected personnel in the test and admission authorities. Moreover, the localities did not receive any transfer payments from the center and were forced to find their own financial solutions; and (2) the educational authorities and the high school administrations lacked the personnel to implement such a policy change (interview 27).



Graph 9: The composition of total test scores for the competitive college selection (by author)

The complaints of the localities derived from practical difficulties that could not have been easily solved in its implementation. Theoretically, the free selection of test subjects diversified the teaching curriculum and increased the flexibility of learning activities—which did no good for students’ individual development. However, good plans are only good if they could actually be implemented. For the high schools, to introduce the free selection of test subjects could be as difficult as transforming the high schools into universities without sufficient financial support and managerial knowledge. Under the current system, students had only two choices: either liberal arts or natural science. The high schools just needed to place them into two groups. It was relatively easy for the high schools to differentiate the curriculum and teaching plans. In terms of the organization of classrooms and the distribution of the teaching staff, high schools had already been accustomed to existing managerial patterns based on the dichotomy of academic disciplines.

However, if the disciplinary dichotomy were abolished and the freedom to choose test subjects were introduced, the high school would have to confront at least the following problems:

- Dissolution of fixed home classes (班级)
- Diversification of students' timetables
- Uncertainty of the demand for subject teachers
- Urgent need for infrastructural improvements

As the high school administrations were directly responsible for the education and entrance exam test preparation of the students, they would have been forced to address (and remedy) these basic problems. To be sure, this policy alternative practically initiated a change in the test regulations that—in the figurative words of many interviewees—works like a “conductor’s baton” (指挥棒) in a symphony orchestra (Interview 29). All actors involved in the *gaokao* tests had to watch this “conductor’s baton” carefully and act accordingly, whenever and wherever necessary. In response to the above four problems, high schools administrations were forced to think of suitable solutions and undertake immediate actions to make sure that the first cohort of students affected by the policy change would be properly taught and trained for the new *gaokao* regulations.

#### **4.4.3 Alternative 3: Offering two chances for the English test**

The third policy alternative was to offer two chances for an English-language test. English has always been a permeant component of the three primary test subjects that are mandatory in the *gaokao* examination. However, in comparison with Chinese and mathematics, English is continuously enmeshed in controversy. NPC’s Special Committee for Education, Science, Culture and Public Health received frequent bills proposed by the People’s representatives (人大代表) calling for a dumbing-down of English curriculum from elementary to secondary education (Jiaojianyi 2017), which could have directly led to a retreat of English testing in the *gaokao*. In the context of globalization and the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), the intention to make English less important in overall education may sound irrational and inappropriate. Nevertheless, this was an interest represented by a considerable portion of Chinese people, who were able to mobilize the People’s representatives to articulate the petition through official

channels. The MOE and the central government cannot easily circumvent their voices. Thus, it was under this context when the experts proposed to offer two chances at English testing for students, who can choose a better score to be counted in the total scores for the university selection.

In early 2013, *People's Daily* revealed that the educational authorities in Beijing initiated a reform plan to reduce the score of the *gaokao* English test from 150 to 120 points (Zhao 2013). After this reform draft was uploaded to the internet for public feedback, it received both praise and criticism from opponents and supporters who clashed over the value of the test. Because it was in the middle of the policy consultations for the *gaokao* reform, the Chinese media seemed to have sensed a feeling of *déjà vu*—that the reform draft in Beijing could also be a signal for national reform in the near future. With information spreading, rumors about the English test soon fermented in the education sector. During early 2014, leading media outlets leaked information from experts suggesting that English tests would soon be removed from the whole *gaokao* package. Gu Mingyuan, head of the Chinese Education Society as well as a key actor among policy experts, quelled the rumors in May 2014; that the English test would not be removed from the *gaokao* exams, and further criticized that the rumors were a misinterpretation by the mass media (Renmin 2014). Comparing Gu Mingyuan's interview with the official document released later in September 2014, sharp changes in the policy content took place just within four months (from May to September). Gu told the media that in the new policy document, English tests would not take place on regular *gaokao* examination dates in June, rather the government would introduce socially organized English tests that did not grade students by scores but by different levels (*ibid.*). Yet, there was little indication that the English test remained in regular *gaokao* examination and students would be offered a second chance previous to *gaokao* (Guofa 2014).

When, who, why, and how experts' suggestions were removed from the new reform policy remains a mystery. However, the change related to English tests had been a hotly debated topic among experts; they had been unable to reach an agreement on what to suggest to the central leadership, and therefore only reported various alternatives that left the final decision to the leadership (Interview 27). Meanwhile, in local deliberations, the alternative changes to the English test faced little resistance from local authorities and high school administrations (*ibid.*).

They considered that a second chance provided to students as beneficial in the selection processes, as one always could use higher score results to compete with their peers.

#### **4.4.4 Alternative 4: Assessment mechanisms of students' comprehensive abilities**

As early as 2008, the Assessment Mechanisms of Students' Comprehensive Abilities (高中生综合素质评价, hereafter: AMSCA) had been successfully placed on the political agenda. Although the implementation failed, some provinces and municipalities engaged in a self-initiated experimentation to install suitable assessment mechanisms in high schools. One interviewee informed me that years before the *gaokao* reform's central initiation, many high schools in Shanghai already engaged with innovative evaluation systems to record students' academic accomplishments and individual characters, and some high schools hired software engineers to develop specific programs to track students' personal development (Interview 27). As the *Paper News* revealed, Shanghai Gezhi High School created a five-dimensional evaluation system that visualized students' abilities in five defined categories: 道德素养 (moral refinement), 创新素养 (innovative ability), 身体素养 (physical capacity), 心理素养 (mental strength) and 学能素养 (learning ability) (Han 2015). These five abilities were measured by teachers on a regular basis in class, as the evaluation aimed to identify the individual features of students to foster a more individualized pattern of education models.

As indicated above, the assessment mechanism was actually not an idea from central policy makers, but a practice that already had been made routine at many high schools for years. The experts obviously included these local practices into their reports which eventually found their way to central decision makers. Unlike test scores, a student's record of academic development was not calculated in absolute numbers and would not be used as more than a reference for the university enrollment process. For the central government, the practice of AMSCA could have been an effective way to solve perennial problems of test-oriented learning and teaching. Local level resistance was expected, as the regional disparities remained persistent obstacles in education reform at the national level. The introduction of assessment mechanisms required not only sufficient financial aid, but also the know-how of creating such an evaluation system that could be adapted to local conditions. High schools in developed regions like Shanghai were (and are) better equipped with resources and personnel. Therefore,

a nationwide introduction of the assessment mechanism remained controversial and problematic.

#### **4.4.5 Selection of experimentation sites: Why Shanghai and Zhejiang?**

As stated in central policy, Shanghai and Zhejiang Province would take a pioneering role in education by experimenting with intended policy changes in the *gaokao* system. Shanghai and Zhejiang educational authorities were asked to devise new ideas and creative solutions to facilitate locally customized adjustments to policy implementation. Among the 31 provincial level administrations, why were Shanghai and Zhejiang particularly chosen as experimentation sites? Having analyzed different responses from policy makers, experts, and educational bureaucrats, the contradictions in answers were fascinating.

In general, the interviewees made assumptions based on information sources and their own estimates. These judgements of *how* the selection was made, may be summarized in three parts:

##### **a) The candidates: Beijing, Shanghai and Zhejiang**

As experts reported, Shanghai always existed as a candidate. However, local authorities wondered why Shanghai would be a clear site. Beijing was recommended, of course, but its name was soon withdrawn for political considerations (Interview 27 and 29). Being the capital of China, potential social instability was too high a risk to ignore considering the wider social impact of the *gaokao* system (Interview 27). Nevertheless, contradictory opinions abound. Educational bureaucrats insisted that Shanghai and Zhejiang voluntarily applied for the policy experiment; that the central leadership did not coerce them (Interview 32). One could argue, of course, that these caveats by education bureaucrats—that Shanghai and Zhejiang were not coerced—were deliberate attempts to shield the central leadership from an external researcher and from possible criticism. Yet, the situation for Shanghai and Zhejiang was always different due to their earlier reactions to policy changes in 2008 and their pioneering roles in education reform. Many policy changes (such as AMSCA) were practiced in these locations for many years and the experience could have been useful for policy learning in other provinces.

##### **b) Advanced education infrastructure and greater organizational capacity in Shanghai and Zhejiang**

Shanghai and Zhejiang were regarded as the most developed provinces in terms of educational quality and organizational management capacity. As the largest GDP contributors to China's economy in the coastal areas, Shanghai and Zhejiang possessed abundant resources and a qualified labor force in the education sector (Interview 26, 27, 29 and 32). One staff from a university admission office said that Shanghai always had been the pioneer and innovator in educational governance and administration; Shanghai was the most professional and "high-class" in the country (Interview 29). Nevertheless, there have been concerns about the potential risks from policy experimentation. Some local officials and affected groups in Shanghai and Zhejiang complained that policy experimentation was quite risky, and that the central government was not offering any financial support to them (Interview 27).

### **c) Shanghai and Zhejiang's early engagement with pilot programs**

Some local bureaucrats from Shanghai and Zhejiang, those more acquainted with the day-to-day workings at the local level, emphasized the high expectations of success by the central leadership. Shanghai and Zhejiang started with the pilot program long before the policy innovation was formulated (Interview 29 and 32). The bureaucrats interpreted the center's selection of Shanghai and Zhejiang because they trusted them and expected good results in establishing successful and demonstrative models to the rest of the country (ibid.). Both locations engaged with key policy changes (e.g., the Assessment Mechanisms of Students' Comprehensive Abilities and the High School Proficiency Tests) in 2007 and 2008, respectively. If they were selected as sites, the experiment would be much easier and more efficient for the implementation. Teachers and bureaucrats, the interviewee opined, simply needed to adjust the current test and admission system while integrating the local models into the national *gaokao* schemes (Interview 27). From this perspective, one could argue that the central decision makers absorbed successful local experience and integrated it into the overarching reform policy for the *gaokao* system.

These three aspects of the selection process were viewed complementarily. No single factor could solely determine the final decision at the central level. Gathering the information together, the rationale for the central selection of sites became clearer: Shanghai and Zhejiang were (and are) richer with a qualified labor force and sufficient infrastructure for the

implementation of these policy innovations. Their previous experience with pilot programs facilitated greater acceptance in China and thus ensured social stability in its implementation.

## 4.5 Summary

This chapter demonstrates the policy content factors (envisioned changes, affected interests, and intended implementers) of the admission policy innovation. Table 4 below encapsulates the factors by listing the exact organizations and actors involved in the four alternative changes. The observations demonstrate the central attempt in building control mechanisms into the policymaking process. As elaborated in Chapter 2, the IESM assumes that irresponsible policy implementation in China is mainly caused by an insufficient policymaking system. The top-level policy innovation design for the admission system illustrates the new measures taken by the central leadership in the decision-making, encapsulating the goals and distributing the tasks to defined organizational units. By clarifying who does what and taking authoritative advantage, the central level demarcates the basic boundaries of the discretionary space through policy formulation. As one MOE official emphasized, “the major responsibility for the MOE is to ensure sufficient policymaking, which is the first kilometer of the long marathon of the policy process” (Interview 22). The difference between policy intent and policy goals is that the policy intent defines *why* a policy is implemented, but the policy goals define *what* is implemented. By setting the exact goals in the policy, the central government influences the lower echelons toward an intended behavior pattern.

Alternatives	Envisioned changes	Affected interest groups	Intended implementers	
A 1	Introducing the high school proficiency tests (HSPT) into the <i>gaokao</i> grading system	High schools Teachers Students and parents	Provincial Education Bureau	
			Test-related	Admission-related
			Provincial test authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission office at provincial level</li> <li>• University admission offices;</li> <li>• University faculties</li> </ul>

<b>A 2</b>	Abolishing the disciplinary dichotomy and ensuring students' individual selection of secondary test subjects	High schools Teachers Students and parents	Provincial Education Bureau	
			<b>Test-related</b>	<b>Admission-related</b>
			Provincial test authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University admission offices</li> <li>• University faculties</li> </ul>
<b>A 3</b>	Offering two chances for the English tests	High schools Teachers Students and parents	Provincial Education Bureau	
			<b>Test-related</b>	<b>Admission-related</b>
			Provincial test authority	/
<b>A 4</b>	Assessment Mechanisms of Students' Comprehensive Abilities (AMSCA)	High schools Teachers Students and parents	Provincial Education Bureau	
			<b>Test-related</b>	<b>Admission-related</b>
			/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University admission offices</li> </ul>

Table 4: Alternative changes analyzed in accordance with content factors of the theoretical framework (by author)

The analysis above depicts the key features of the policymaking of the *gaokao* policy innovation: (1) the persistence of central policy intent; (2) the overlapping processes of policymaking and policy implementation; (3) experts' roles as intermediary; and (4) the black box of final decision-making. The key features in policymaking explicitly demonstrate the complexity of how the policy content emerged and evolved over time and why some policy alternatives survived and why some were eliminated at certain points. As suggested earlier, the content factors of the policy innovation constructed a substantial force that compresses the discretionary space at the local level.

Derived from the key characteristics of the policymaking process, the next section provides the observed evidence and formulates the causal inferences to test the hypothesis. It is argued in this chapter that the policy content was deliberately constructed by the central leadership in a way that the local governments were constrained in its implementation (i.e., the discretionary power for flexible policy implementation is curtailed through central authority in determining the policy content.)

#### **4.5.1 Persistence of central policy intent: Nurturing talents and accumulation of human capital**

Although the policymaking had endured a long time (2005-2014), the central policy intent never changed. No matter which goals were set, and which policy alternatives were put on the agenda, the central intent remained consistent: The *gaokao* reform promoted the *suzhi* education to accelerate talent production to fulfill labors' needs for the economic transition. In the making of the *gaokao* policy innovation, the central government and the CCP took the dominant role in translating central policy intent into context-related goals and strategies. The contextual link between admission policy and economic transition had been deliberately established and fixed in the agenda-setting and policy formulation process. In the official policy document, the central intent was articulated in an ideological and spiritual manner. The functional role of the admission system was elevated and integrated into the broader political blueprint of the "China Dream," which could only be realized with sufficient labor and qualified talent (Guofa 2014). It was with this ambitious objective that the central government navigated through the policymaking process and insisted on alternative changes that served as effective levers to achieve institutional change at the local level. The persistence of central intent not only influenced the goal-setting of policy innovation, but also controlled the local interpretation of the intended policy change.

#### **4.5.2 Overlapping processes of policymaking and policy implementation**

By listing the key events of policymaking in chronological order, it becomes clear that the policymaking and implementation processes were intermingled. Graph 10 below shows that prior to the official launch of the policy innovation in September 2014, the vice-premier already pre-approved the implementation plan proposed by the Shanghai and Zhejiang educational authorities. It reveals the central intention to assure the feasibility of local implementation plans before official launch of central policy. Moreover, in order to uphold the CCP's legitimacy, the central leaders had to ensure that the implementation would not provoke social riots.

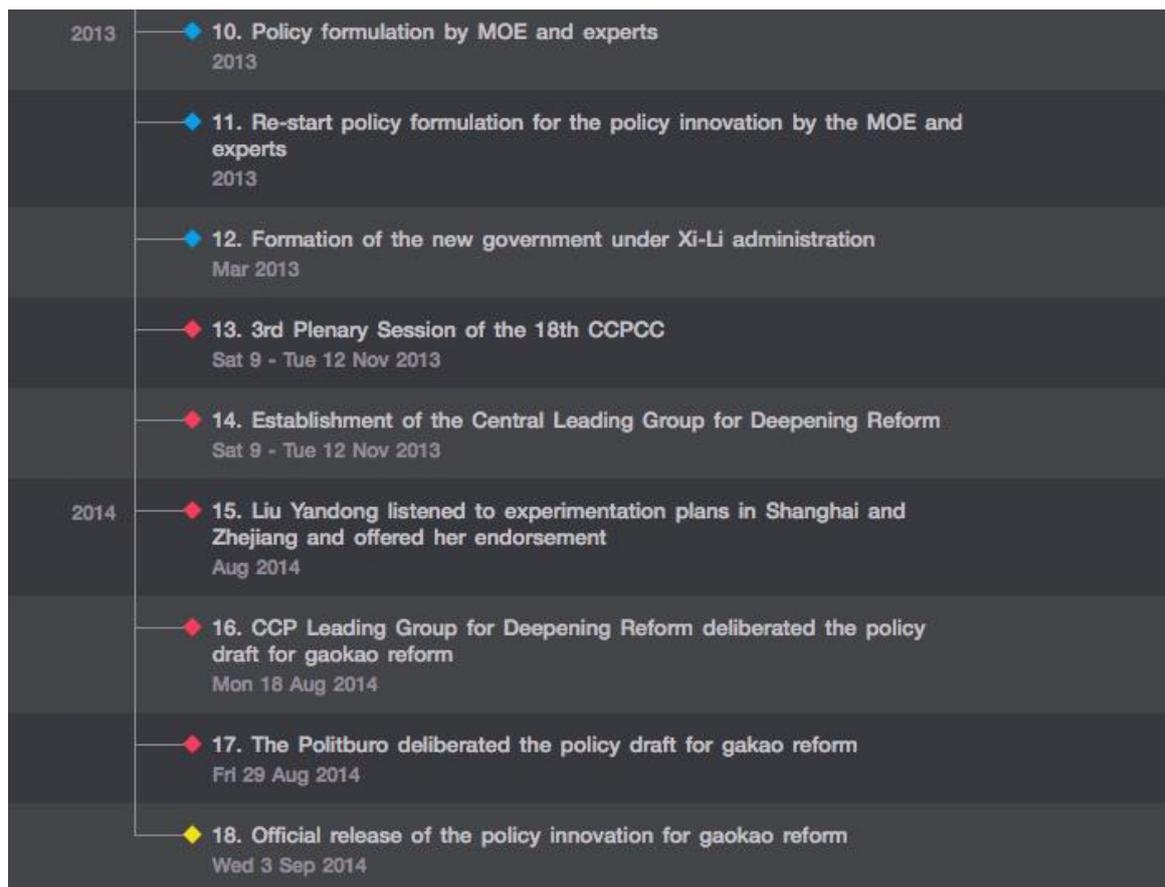
In fact, Shanghai and Zhejiang already engaged with the self-initiated pilot programs in high schools. Both policy experts and educational bureaucrats confirmed these prototypes during field interviews (Interview 38). Furthermore, bureaucrats in the educational *xitong* had suggested that it would be otherwise too late to start with the implementation after the official

announcement of the policy innovation (Interview 22, 27, 29 and 31). The Shanghai Education Commission held several meetings in 2013 to circulate the alternative policy changes. All local bureaucrats, who would be the potential implementers, were asked to attend these meetings commonly known as “briefing” (吹风会) in which attendees were required to sign a “non-disclosure” or “confidentiality” agreements (保密协议) (Interview 29). Interviewees from the Zhejiang Test Authority revealed exactly the same procedures organized by the Zhejiang Education Bureau, and the education bureaucrats immediately started with the resource mobilization (动员工作) and general preparation for the implementation of the *gaokao* policy innovation in July 2013 (Interview 32).

Though briefings within the educational *xitong* were not institutionalized, they facilitated an overlap in policymaking and policy implementation. These advance meetings served as a channel for information exchanges among local bureaucrats and between the central and local bureaucrats. In addition, they created a window of time, in which the localities could make the implementation plans and co-opt the potential recipients to support implementation. The affected groups in the reform plan were all informed of the different tasks in the following years. The internal meetings at the local level encouraged cross-regional information exchanges. With Shanghai and Zhejiang being geographical neighbors, their respective bureaucrats had many opportunities to share the coping of tactics, either formally or informally.

Therefore, the policy process constructed a non-linear trajectory, encompassing multiple processes that occur in tandem with different government levels and among different policy actors. These processes were not mutually exclusive, but overwhelmingly interwoven. Their interconnectedness, or embeddedness, was established through information exchanges, or through those actors who played different roles in different processes. In this respect, the conjunction of the processes is critical in the decision-making of alternative policy changes.

Unlike the policy process in Western democracies, where implementation takes place only after the legal enactment of passed laws, the policy process in authoritarian regimes does not follow this logical sequence within the policy cycle. Implementation can occur much earlier than the legislative approval of a new policy.



Graph 10: Identifying critical junctures of the policymaking process (by author)

The discretionary power of the local government is therefore weak and fragile. Local actors treated the goals as assigned top-down orders and could only think of coping measures in compliance with the central leadership's aims. Furthermore, the central intervention in the design of local plans successfully controlled local abuse of implementation and avoided misinterpretation and displacement of central goals.

#### 4.5.3 Policy experts as intermediaries of central-local information exchanges

The previous section explained the interwovenness of policymaking and implementation, which was partly generated by the information exchanges among different actors. In this section, I elaborate on a particular group of actors—policy experts—whose involvement bridged the communication gap between the central and local bureaucrats, and between bureaucrats and external interest groups. Though the experts had underestimated their impact on decision-making, their functional role as intermediaries between interest groups should not be overlooked. As the experts themselves acknowledged, their ideas provided little direct influence

on the central decision makers. Indirectly, however, they played an important role in providing key information for the decision-making by the central policy maker. *How* policy experts transmitted the central intention at the local level was arguably crucial in guaranteeing conformity of interpretation in Shanghai and Zhejiang.

The policy experts were members of the Advisory Commission for National Educational Examinations and they were assigned by the National Leading Group for Educational Reform to conduct field research at local levels and draft policy suggestions to the central decision makers. As Graph 11 below suggests, the establishment of the expert group actually built up informal connections for information exchanges, through which both central and local actors gathered on-site information that otherwise could not have been acquired at formal meetings with other actors—superiors or subordinates.

Moreover, the composition of the membership in the Advisory Commission also subtly contributed to multilayer information flows. Many commission members carried two or more institutional identities in the educational *xitong* (i.e., they were not simply policy experts, but also education bureaucrats, crucial members of the MOE *dangzu*, economists, and policy advisors to the central leadership.)<sup>42</sup> Multiple identities allowed them to participate in a much larger range of meetings, policy deliberations, and hearings at different levels and with different interest groups. Therefore, it is fair to say that the policy experts constituted the hub for information exchanges among different policy actors and interest groups.

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<sup>42</sup> The institutional affiliations of the commission members can be found in the personal profiles on the official websites of the MOE and affiliated organizations. A full list of commission members is available in the internal circulation: Guojiaozhi 2012 (No. 1).



Graph 11: Policy experts as intermediaries of central-local information exchanges (by author)

As the intermediary between the center and local governments, policy experts created buffering zones between central steering and local resistance. The center received information about local views, whereas locals were made aware of central intent and anticipated the tasks potentially imposed on them. Therefore, the central decision makers could realize their goals and tasks, and specify the actors needed to consolidate its control over local discretion. As for the locals, it was a timely advantage to actualize policy intent early and to start with the administrative adjustments and resource distribution in advance.

#### 4.5.4 Black box: Finalizing the policy alternatives, selecting the experimentation sites and concretizing of local responsibilities

As previously analyzed, the final decision-making of key policy changes took place among a small group of top leaders. This partly explains why the experts evaluated their own impact on policymaking as limited.

The decision-making process endured over a long period and the policy drafts were revised several times after each deliberation. As suggested by the experts, internal discussions about policy alternatives were initially held among an extended group of actors (including experts from the advisory commission and MOE bureaucrats), but the decision-making circle narrowed when the draft was passed on to the next higher level for approval. The last round of policy deliberations took place exclusively among the top leaders from the CLGDR and the Politburo in August 2014. Therefore, no one knows what the 23 members of the CLGDR and

the 25 members of the Politburo discussed behind closed doors concerning the policy alternatives and *how* the new *gaokao* policy was approved. Yet in light of the decision-making rules of the collective leadership, one could argue that at least 13 members of the Politburo agreed with the policy alternatives in the final version of the new policy; according to the principles of the so-called “collective presidency,” all members of the central leadership had the same status and their decision-making was the result of collective decisions: one person has one vote, and the majority decision holds (Hu 2014:9).

Furthermore, by comparing experts’ interviews with the various policy documents related to the *gaokao* reform, it can be identified that the policy alternative of changing English tests has been persistently kept on the policy agenda (Interview 27), but the policy alternative of delegating independent admission authority to the universities was rejected when the draft was transferred to top-level authorities for policy deliberation (Interview 8). Actually, the independent admission authority was consistently suggested by experts on various occasions. One interviewee revealed that he was still in the decision-making circle and deliberated on policy content with the MOE bureaucrats, when the policy change for delegating admission authority to individual universities was widely acknowledged and when the then-Minister insisted on inserting this new policy change. However, it disappeared in the final policy document. The plausible assumption, therefore, is that the decision to eliminate this policy change occurred at higher levels of the MOE.

In terms of the selection of sites, the central decision-making was also not transparent. By gathering scattered pieces of information, the following reasons could be summarized to explain the selection decision:

- both Shanghai and Zhejiang were rich and possessed abundant educational resources;
- they already started with policy changes years earlier;
- Beijing was eventually excluded for stability reasons; and
- Both locations appeared more active in response to reform attempts.

The black box of central decision-making demonstrates the authoritative character of the top-level policy innovation design in the policymaking mechanism, which aims to strengthen the central control over local behaviors and narrow down the discretionary space of the local bureaucrats. The local governments and affected groups are inferior due to their

positions in the hierarchical bureaucracy and limited participation in the decision-making process.

## **5 Tracing the implementing activities: Local experimentation in Shanghai and Zhejiang**

Following the analysis of central policymaking, this chapter continues with the empirical illustration of local implementation processes in Shanghai and Zhejiang. It aims to elucidate how the local implementers interpreted the central policy goals and translated them into implementing plans, as well as how these plans were practiced by front-line staffs in the educational bureaucracies at both sites. The major task of this chapter is to trace how the various interest groups at local levels reacted to the imposed institutional changes.

The context factors for implementation will be explained based on a brief sketch of the institutional context of local implementation system. The implementation activities in Shanghai and Zhejiang are described according to the same criteria in order to provide valid observational evidence to draw the causal claims.

### **5.1 Key actors of admission policy implementation**

The implementation of education policy requires a chain of bureaucratic actions taken by a variety of actors in the education system, including those officials serving in different educational authorities, and those front-line implementers (i.e., teachers and school principals who interact with educational authorities and respond with actual practices to the regulations and rules derived from the new policies). How do they cope with the changes imposed on them by the 2014 admission policy innovation? What shapes the behavioral patterns of the actors involved in the implementation processes? This section elaborates on the key actors in the admission implementation system and analyzes its structural constraints imposed on the actors.

#### **5.1.1 The Education *xitong*: Test authority and admission authority for implementation**

Bureaucratic ranking and functional differentiation account for the fragmentation of the state authority in China's multilevel political system. In such a system, official's negotiation power is restrained due to the dichotomy of *tiao-kuai* power lines. It generates a common situation that each administrative unit needs a great deal of coordination and negotiation up and down, left and right in the political hierarchy. The educational bureaucracy represents the functional system (*xitong*) for education affairs that constructs the vertical power branch (*tiao*) emanating

from the MOE down to the township level. The reality of this disjointed bureaucracy is that the lower level officials have two “bosses”: one in the functional *xitong* and another in the territorial government.

For the implementation of admission policies, the test authority and admission authority play dominant role in decision-making of implementation. Authority refers to all the bureaucratic organizations that need to be mobilized to facilitate the intended policy changes in the test and admission system. In order to illustrate the bureaucratic units of the test and admission authority, the *tiao-kuai* matrix is applied for visualization and Shanghai is used as an example of local government to demonstrate the power structures of the test and admission authorities in a central-local perspective.

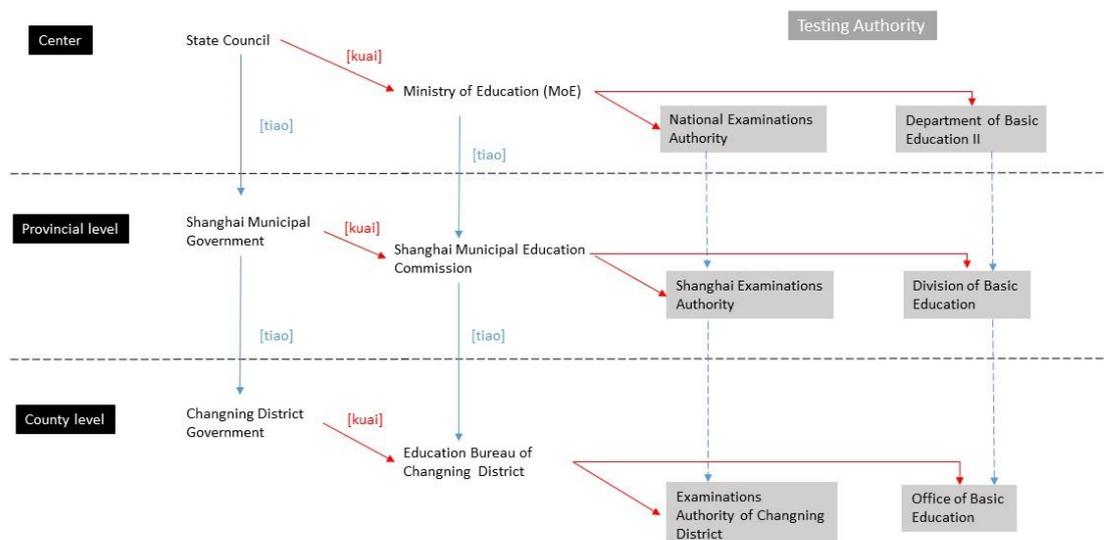
### **The testing authority**

The National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA) and the Department of Basic Education (II) at the central level head the administrative units for test management, with respective subordinates sitting at different territorial government levels (see Graph 12 below).

The NEEA is the national authority for various examinations in China, ranging from the university entrance examinations to Oxford Children’s English Proficiency Test. In general, the NEEA divides the tests into two categories: educational tests (relating to compulsory schooling and education qualifications) and the socially-organized tests (i.e., tests aiming at additional credentials). In terms of higher education entrance examinations, the NEEA is broadly entrusted with four responsibilities: (a) co-working with various departments under the MOE to draft and formulate national policies and regulations for the university entrance tests; (b) producing test propositions and organizing the examination with local educational administrations; (c) managing the evaluation and scoring of examination and (d) collecting the results and conducting statistical analysis (NEEA 2016). The NEEA has two offices for the test propositions of the *gaokao*: the division for the proposition of higher education entrance examinations and the division for the proposition of foreign language tests for the *gaokao*. Every year around the beginning of May, the NEEA will organize teachers across the country to propose the paper exams for each test subject. The proposition team is formed through a selection of teachers and education experts from a personnel database. Normally, the selection process needs to be carried out randomly and anonymously, so that selected teachers cannot

know in advance that they will be in charge for this year's proposition (Interview 22 and 26). In so doing, the NEEA tries to avoid any abuses of the selected teachers for the test proposition, who otherwise might divulge test content to their home schools. The testing authority has extended branches at the provincial and county levels (see Graph 12), but the local test authorities are alienated to the central NEEA (see dotted blue lines), and "the issues relating to test management are mostly digested and approved locally" (Interview 29 and 32). In this sense, it reflects what the Chinese calls "Making *tiao* serve *kuai*"—to give the horizontal line of authority priority over its vertical counterpart (Lieberthal 1997:4). Taking Shanghai as an example, the Shanghai Examinations Authority represents the local administration for tests and examinations. Belonging to the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (SMEC), it needs to respond to central reform policies only under the guidance of the SMEC. The county-level testing authority normally apply what the upper-level orders; they are involved in the general preparation of the tests because the county-level educational authorities work intensively with the high schools within their jurisdictions. The local test bureaucracies play a supportive role by completing miscellaneous duties in the *gaokao* process (e.g., the collection of students' university preference lists, coordinating mock exams for the district high schools, the announcement of the changes in the test, and admission rules).

Since the 1980s, several provinces acquired the autonomy to propose individual test papers for *gaokao* nor would these provinces be joining the annual test proposition at the national level (which is organized by the NEEA). The independent proposition changed the relations between the provincial educational authority and the MOE in various ways. The provinces with autonomous proposition power could organize their own proposition team. While establishing the local proposition team, the local test authority also followed the rule of random and anonymous selection to ensure justice and equality. However, under such circumstances, the local test authorities would no longer rely on the NEEA. Furthermore, once the provinces possessed the ability and autonomy to propose individual tests, the secondary education and teaching plans could enjoy more flexibility for adjustments. The management of upper secondary education (grade 10-12, 高中) in each province was decisive for the preparation of the *gaokao* exams. The responsible authority was the Department of Basic Education (II) and its subordinates at the local levels.



Graph 12: Organizational structure of the testing authority (by author)

The Department of Basic Education (II) played a more significant role in the policy shift of test and admission system because it managed the teaching and curriculum reform in the high schools. Any changes in the test rules would directly affect the daily teaching and curriculum plans of high schools nationwide. Different from the NEEA, which is only affiliated to MOE, the Department of Basic Education (II) sat directly in MOE's general quarter in Beijing and ranked higher than the NEEA despite the fact that they were both at the central level.

According to the "Provision on the Main Functions, Internal Structure and Staffing of the MOE," the Department of Basic Education (II) is responsible for the general work of upper secondary education (from tenth grade to twelfth grade) at the macro-level (Guobanfa 2008). It further carries out development policies and reform policies for the curriculum setting and teaching plans for upper secondary education. When needed, it evaluates and approves the curriculum content and the textbooks, respectively (ibid.). Within the department, an administrative office deals with the general affairs of high schools and upper secondary education (*gaozhong shiye chu*, 高中事业处). For example, they decide on the national standardized teaching plan for every subject and each subject plan further divides into various modules that specify the subject requirements and the scope of knowledge to be learned by high school students. At the provincial level, there is a division of basic education that is under the

direct supervision of the provincial educational commission (see Graph 12). At the county level, the office of basic education is the internal unit within the District Bureau of Education. Most of the high schools are managed and monitored by the education bureau of their district, with the exceptions of model schools that are either managed by the municipal government or the central education authority. I will elaborate separately on the relationship between high schools and the educational bureaucracy in later sections.

By way of reemphasis on the parameters of the testing authority, the NEEA and the local examination divisions are responsible for the *gaokao* tests and the organization of the three-day examination. The Department of Basic Education (II) and its local administrative units decide on the curriculum and teaching plans for the upper secondary education. In principle, these present the requirements of the *gaokao* examination and affects how students and teachers prepare for the subject tests. While viewing the *gaokao* system, one should avoid delineating clear-cut lines of authority, as these actors are—in many ways—interlinked, especially when it comes to testing. As for the *gaokao*, the Department of the Basic Education (II), together with the NEEA, agree on the unified guidelines for the testing of each subject. The territorial governments and their educational bureaus must study the guidelines carefully in order to create locally adapted teaching plans for the high schools in their respective jurisdictions. Though the NEEA shoulders the responsibility of establishing the national proposition team, it cannot accomplish the task without the help of the Department of Basic Education (II)—the actor that regulates high schools and their teaching faculties. During the three days of *gaokao* tests, it is again the local basic education divisions and the high schools that assist in the organization of testing. Inter-departmental cooperation becomes essential. The central policy of the “Decision on the Reform of Educational System” in 1985 has decentralized the authority of basic education (from elementary schools to high schools) down to the local level provided that the localities follow central policies and guidance (MOE 1985). The individual provincial governments can determine how the administrative duties and responsibilities are distributed at the prefectural, county, and township levels (*ibid.*).

### **The admission authority**

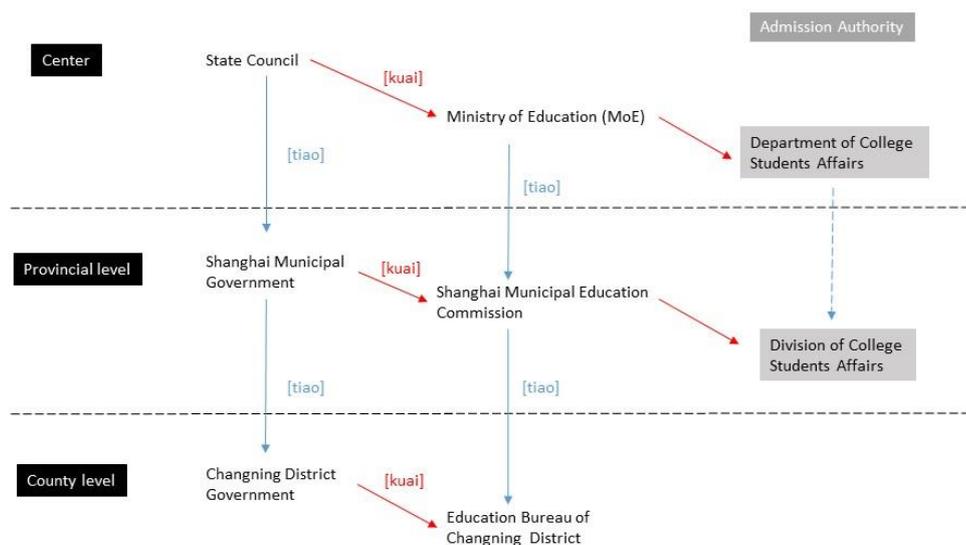
For issues related to university admissions, there is another line of authority from the central to the local level: the Department of College Students Affairs in the MOE (DCSA, see Graph 13).

The DCSA manages all issues related to university students (undergraduate students), ensuring that subordinate admission bureaucracies and university admissions offices comply with all laws and policies. It is assigned the following tasks:

- (1) to co-organize the admission tests for higher education;
- (2) to manage the admission and enrollment procedures of higher education institutions;
- (3) to monitor the local educational administrations and higher education institutions so that sufficient career services are provided to the university graduates; and
- (4) to participate in the drafting of employment policies for university graduates (Guobanfa 2008).

The DCSA is divided into five subunits: the Office of Comprehensive Issues, the Division for Undergraduate Admission, the Division for Graduate Admission, the Division for Students' Profiles and Degree Credentials, and the Division for Graduates' Employment (MOE 2016b). As indicated in the Graph 13, the admissions bureaucracy for higher education is only extended to the provincial levels, since the operational procedures of *gaokao* admissions take place at the provincial level. Additionally, another group of administrative units is involved in university admissions: the admissions offices at each university. However, due to the complexity of bureaucratic credentials and entitlements, universities' positions in the authority structure vary greatly. All universities and colleges in China are classified based on their affiliation to governmental units. This classification exerts an impact on the university's admissions office where the annual admissions plan is made. As the vice president of a university in Shanghai mentioned during an interview:

[t]he affirmative actions, such as admitting more rural students and non-Shanghainese students, are targeted at those ministry-affiliated universities...for us, the local-funded universities, it is not strictly demanded (Interview 28).



Graph 13: Organizational structure of the admission authority (by author)

In a planned admissions system, the DCSA might be powerful, but situated in a fragmented bureaucratic system, its power is constrained. Neither the MOE nor the DCSA could set the total amount of the annual university admissions alone (Interview 22). Normally the decisions need to be made through the inter-ministerial conferences (联席会议) with the National Commission for Development and Reform (NCDR) (ibid.). Nevertheless, the DCSA is responsible for the gathering of quotas reported by the universities, with the centrally funded universities directly reporting their quota plans to the DCSA (for details, see Chapter 3).

### 5.1.2 The senior high schools: *Gaokao* ex-ante, access to secondary education (*zhongkao*), classification of high schools

The *gaokao* test-takers are students from the twelfth grade—the last year of senior secondary education. The state imposes a compulsory education for nine years in China (NPC 2006). The senior secondary education goes from the tenth grade to the twelfth grade, but it is not compulsory for all. Access to senior high schools is as selective as the *gaokao*. The National Examination for Secondary Education (中考) diverts students of the ninth grade to different tracks on the educational ladder, with many students attending either vocational schools or technical training schools while others simply enter the job market. Vocational education has long held a lower status than academic education. Many Chinese students and their parents are

stigmatized by (and consequently resist) vocational schooling; those who end up there feel anxious for their future career development and gradually grow ever cynical and flippant about learning in general (Hansen and Woronov 2013:243). Only those who have performed well on the *zhongkao* will be admitted by senior high schools.

The latest MOE statistics indicate that in the total number of students at secondary education in 2015 comprised 58.8 percent from the senior high schools, 41 percent from the vocational high schools, and 0.2 percent from the adult secondary schools (MOE 2016c).

That said, prior to the *gaokao*, another selective examination excluded a large portion of the students in the same age-cohort from the *gaokao* tests. Even among the students enrolled to senior high schools, there is a clear classification based on the fame of their schools.

According to the 2016 statistical bulletin by the MOE, there were 13,200 senior high schools nationwide (MOE 2016a) with graduates in 2015 amounting to some 7.97 million. This number was always smaller than the annual *gaokao* test-takers (9.42 million in 2015) because many repeat test-takers from 2015 were not satisfied with the previous year's *gaokao* results.

As mentioned above, the Department of the Basic Education (II) and its subordinate units at the provincial, prefectural, and county levels are the governmental units responsible for the management of senior high schools. In urban areas, the district level educational bureaus supervise the senior high schools within their jurisdiction as well as report their work to the provincial level education bureaus. In rural areas, the finance of basic education is decentralized down to the township level (Davis 1989), whereas many township educational bureaus depend on financial transfers from the county (Interview 27). In terms of teaching plans, the districts or counties play a major role. The teachers of the senior high schools are trained by the county level educational bureaus. Similar teachers' training programs are offered, once the *gaokao* test guidelines are released by the MOE. Teachers from one county or district will have the chance to meet on a regular basis and to communicate with each other's teaching progress or problems (interview 37).

Strong competition exists among senior high schools within a province. Under the centrally planned quota system, the high school students from the same province strive for a given number of university slots—which means that test-takers compete with their peers in the

same province. The reputation of the senior high schools depends significantly on their students' rate of success in passing the *gaokao* examinations (Unger 1984:176). In many places, teachers' career development positively correlates with their students' performance in the *gaokao* examinations (Interview 19, 20, and 21). The school principals and teachers frequently refer to the student rate in entering first-tier universities (一本升学率) as a strong indication of their advanced educational quality. To be sure, many high schools even use this measurement to reward the class teachers in monetary terms. Parents believe that good high schools and experienced teachers increase the chances of their offspring matriculating at leading universities. Unsurprisingly, both the high schools and their teaching faculty are identified by a set of quantifiable indicators (e.g., the annual students' rate in entering the first-tier universities, the total number of students entering Peking University and Tsinghua University, and so forth). To distinguish senior high schools rests not only on socially recognized qualities, but also the diverse government-installed mechanisms to increase competition among high schools.

The classification has been reinforced and institutionalized by policy instruments favoring a number of selected high schools. The key-point schools were re-established after the reform and opening up, when academic merit again came to the forefront in accessing higher education. The 1980s witnessed a proliferation of key-point schools nationwide, with the majority located in urban areas (TencentNews 2011). The provincial education bureaus are responsible for the evaluation and entitlement of key-point schools, which, in turn, are well funded and well equipped with advanced teaching facilities, computers, chemistry labs, and multi-media devices. The unbalanced resource distribution between the key-point schools and other ordinary high schools soon resulted in a growing gap in education quality. Concurrently, the disadvantaged groups—children from less-well funded high schools or vocational secondary schools—have grown increasingly alienated from an educational system perceived to be distorted and unfair. The credibility crisis of the key-point schools did touch a nerve of the central government. Gradually, it was no longer encouraged to differentiate the key-point schools from others and until 2006, with the amendment to the Law of Compulsory Education, the establishment of the key-point schools are now legally forbidden. Clause 53 stipulates that any territorial governments or educational bureaucracies above the county level, if practices of awarding key-point schools are disclosed, must be punished by the next higher level of the

territorial government and related educational bureaus, and an official warning letter will be openly circulated across the educational bureaucracy nationwide (通报批评) (NPC 2006).

Nevertheless, instead of “key-point schools,” governmental policies began to confer upon the selected high schools the title of “demonstrative schools (示范性中学)” or “model schools (模范中学).” Old wine, new bottles. The former key-point schools simply replaced their entitlement with a nicer and more neutral-sounding appellation. “Demonstrative schools” may sound less discriminating, but the basic principle of classifying the senior high schools as privileged remains. School principals, teachers, students, and parents all share the same goal and a common interest—to beat their peers at the *gaokao* and matriculate at leading universities. The provincial educational bureaus apply similar mechanism to select and evaluate these elite schools (SHMEC 2005). Students need to obtain much higher scores in the *zhongkao* exam to attend the model high schools where the teaching faculty is better qualified.

Recent studies on Chinese university access revealed that students from key-point schools, or renamed as demonstrative schools, were more likely to obtain access to higher education (Ye 2015:128). Furthermore, these schools were identified as one of the major sources of educational elites from 1994 to 2014 (Pengpai 2015). Data show that over 90 percent of the students from Peking University come from key-point/demonstrative schools. For the rural students, attending key-point/demonstrative schools became the precondition for higher education (Liang and Lee 2012:114-115). Undoubtedly, if there were a classification at the level of secondary education, there would be a more deliberate classification at the higher point on the educational ladder.

The next section presents another key actor in the admission policy implementation system—the universities and colleges that are classified by affiliations to bureaucratic units in the education *xitong*.

### **5.1.3 The higher education institutions: Bureaucratic affiliation, common establishment, excellence funding schemes, university stratification and regional inequalities**

Regarding the progression from secondary education to higher education, senior high schools and universities play distinctive roles: the former determines the teaching quality and eventually

affects the scholastic aptitude of the students. The latter makes the final decision of enrollments based on student aptitude (assessed by the *gaokao* scores). Following the contextual explanation of the senior high schools, this section aims to illustrate the different relationships between universities and the state that are shaped by various government-sponsored competition mechanisms. The analysis focuses on how the institutionalized competition nurtured a structured net of administrative interests spreading over the educational bureaucracy, and how these interests can be bargained, shifted, and exchanged in the process of university admission in China.

### **Classification of universities: Bureaucratic affiliations**

By 1978, the universities in China were all centrally funded and managed in the form of work units (*danwei*)—a type of social autarky (Christiansen 1996:5). Universities not only provided job positions for teachers, but also took care of housing, education, and health care of the teaching faculty, administrative staff, and their family members. Since the 1980s, the higher education system started to involve multiple actors in the centralized structure intent on borrowing Western management experience and allowing private funding for the development of universities and colleges (MOE 1985).

The reform efforts encountered abrupt changes due to the student movement in 1989. Besides the funding issues, the reform shifted its focus to the structural changes in the central-local relations of university management. Policies were issued to straighten the relationships between the state, society, and the universities (Guofa 1993) and to adapt a centralized and planned higher education system to the economic development and emerging social needs of China (Zhongfa 1993). The major tasks for the educational bureaucracy were to dissolve the centralized system of university management by delegating responsibilities to the provincial level, and to establish multiple funding channels for the universities, forging a system that incorporates both the central ministries and the provincial governments (两级管理, 两级负责) (Guobanfa 1995; Guofa 1993).

Chinese universities remain public in 2019 and the shared-responsibility system between the central and local government established the bureaucratic foundation for the university administration. The nexus between the universities and the state has systematically

fostered a classification of the universities. Each university's relational distance to the central ministries (the MOE and other sectoral ministries) can be viewed as a measure to classify the universities. The closer the bureaucratic relation to the center is, the higher the university is ranked. In general, two mechanisms, which have been institutionalized through a set of reform programs, have gradually shaped the pyramid structure of the universities: the bureaucratic affiliation system and the common establishment funding programs.

As indicated above, the bureaucratic affiliation defines the official relationship of each university to the bureaucratic functional body. The attachment to a powerful or weak governmental unit is the fundamental university classification indicator. The governmental hierarchy in China is represented by the bureaucratic ranks. So, the universities' affiliation to bureaucratic units forms a hierarchical structure in a similar vein. There are three types of affiliation that categorize the universities into three hierarchical levels:

- (1) The highest level of affiliation is the MOE-ownership. These universities are directly managed by the MOE at the central level (教育部直属高校). The MOE has a special office that is in charge of supervision and controls the MOE-universities (Guobanfa 2008). Currently, there are altogether 75 universities and colleges owned by the MOE (MOE 2016d). This group of universities possess the highest bureaucratic affiliation among all higher education institutions, or HEIs. Holding their direct relationship to the MOE, the local educational bureaus are restrained from intervening in the decision-making process for some important issues, especially those relating to the central concern and national strategies. In section 5.1.1 (The Admission Authority), it was already shown that locally funded universities were not pressured in terms of fulfilling central quota redistribution targets to rural and western regions, but the centrally funded universities must make the annual quota plan in compliance with the central affirmative action programs.
- (2) The next level of university affiliation is the affiliation to other sectoral ministries and bureaus at the central level (中央部属高校). These universities are attached to one specific ministry or bureau in the State Council (e.g., Ministry of Finance or National Bureau of Custom). These universities have been decreasing since the structural changes in the 1990s. As previously explained, they were widely established during the

1950s, when the CCP tried to follow the Soviet model of higher education to train professionals and elites for specific industrial sectors. To date, less than 50 universities are managed by the central ministries (except MOE) (MOE 2001). These universities are credited with high academic prestige and they play a leading role in specific disciplines and professional sectors. For instance, the China Foreign Affairs University, which is affiliated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is known as the “cradle of Chinese diplomats.” Students from these universities have more secured career chances than their peers from other universities. The fixed job allocation (分配), which prevailed until the 1980s under the planned system, is still applied in some of universities that dispatch a portion of their graduates to specific governmental organizations or state-owned companies. Different from the old allocation system, however, the students now can refuse the job offer of the university and go into the free labor market.

- (3) The lowest level of the bureaucratic affiliation is the provincial affiliation. Universities under this category are owned by provincial level governments or provincial education bureaus (地方省属高). The provincial level universities actually make up the majority of the HEIs and they are funded and supervised by either the provincial government or the provincial education bureaus and commissions. In comparison to the previous two types of universities, the provincial level universities are large in number but weak in academic fame due to the lower level of bureaucratic affiliation. Students only consider them as alternative options for university entrance, when they perform worse than expected in *gaokao* examinations. As the economic conditions in China vary widely from province to province, the development of HEIs also differs greatly on a cross-regional basis. In this sense, the location of these universities becomes more important than their official affiliations. In some less developed western regions, the locally funded universities face serious problems to attract enough students to fulfill the admission quotas, but the situation for those HEIs located in metropolitan areas is the opposite. A student from a second-tier university in Shanghai stated that with her high *gaokao* scores, she could have matriculated at a first-tier university in a western province, but she chose to study in Shanghai because one can have more job opportunities in large cities (Interview 21). In some rich provinces like Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Guangdong, the staff from the provincial level universities are even paid

substantially better than the centrally owned universities. A lecturer from one MOE-owned university in Shanghai said, “if you want to improve your research ability, you should go to the MOE-universities, but if you want to have a decent life, you’d better choose the local universities.” (Interview 30). By saying that, he was more or less complaining about the low payment, but the key point he wanted to make was that the professors at MOE-universities are academically more qualified and more virtuous.

The bureaucratic affiliation of the universities represents a deliberate network of relationships based on hierarchical bureaucratic ranks. An affiliation to the MOE or to other ministries indicates closer relational ties to the central level, implying a higher social status and greater negotiating power within the educational bureaucracy, as the administrative rank exerts a great impact on the educational resources, funding structure, and particularly, the admission quotas of the universities. Although the restructuring projects for the university management system initially intended to enhance the universities capacity and establish more world-class universities (Zhao and Zhu 2010:118-119), unintentionally, the administrative shifts derived from these project have given birth to the institutionalized bureaucratic affiliation system that classifies the universities. This classification of the universities even has a wider impact on students’ choices and staff’s payrolls. Although the universities affiliated to the provincial governments are classified as lower level HEIs, the location of the universities could change students’ decision of college choice, and the economic prosperity of the localities could compensate the universities’ staff with higher salaries. In plain words, the bureaucratic affiliation of the universities remains a strong factor affecting the behavioral logic of the involved actors in higher education testing and admissions system.

What the MOE initially intended was to decentralize the power by mobilizing *tiao-kuai* authorities at all levels. It wanted to introduce gradually market mechanisms to the management structure of the higher education system. By doing so, the universities should incrementally dissociate themselves from national control—incrementally but absolutely. The central government still retains the leading role for important policy issues, to be sure. Yet it is the central government who determines which issues are important. Consequently, universities’ relational distance to the central level becomes diversified, with only a few leading universities retaining close ties to the central ministries and the majority being under provincial supervision.

## **Reinforcing the classification of universities: Variations of the projects of “common establishment”**

Despite the bureaucratic affiliation system, the programs of common establishment have been diversified over the years, which consequently intensified the systematic classification of the universities. In the course of university restructuring since 1990s, the government has been experimenting with different forms of common establishments. Initially, common establishments were contract-based agreements between the central MOE and the provincial governments. Gradually, new actors were involved in the programs (e.g., state-owned enterprises (SOE) from key industries). Moreover, provincial governments have carried out different local policies to match the central goals of joint construction and funding.

As the name indicated, the common establishment projects aim to include more bureaucratic units to jointly fund and manage the development of the selected universities. The fixed actor of the common establishments is the MOE—normally the initiator, as well. Depending on the type of collaboration, there are different project partners involved: provincial governments, a specific ministry, or leading SOE from an industry. To secure the frictionless implementation, the MOE will sign a joint agreement (共建协议) with the selected university and the involved project members. The agreements function as binding contracts, which clearly define the duties and responsibilities of each project member, and in some agreements, there are very concrete and quantified distribution of funding responsibilities among the project members. According to the composition of the project members, the common establishment projects can be divided into four types:

- (1) the central-local common establishments for MOE-managed universities (与地方政府共建). The central-local common establishment was introduced by the MOE in 1993. It aimed to impel the provincial governments to co-fund the universities which are owned by the MOE, but geographically in the provincial territory (ZJNJ 1994:6). To date, there are 32 universities which were put under the common establishment agreements between the MOE and the provincial governments (MOE 2005b). The provincial governments are required to share the funding responsibilities of the MOE-owned universities located in the provincial jurisdictions. In the project contracts, the proportion of central and provincial funding distribution is clearly defined. For example,

in the common establishment contracts for Fudan University and Shanghai Jiaotong University, both MOE and Shanghai Municipal Government agreed to invest 0.7 billion RMB for each university in the funding period from 2004 to 2008 (Jiaozhi 2005). In the case of Xiamen University, the distribution of funding was even agreed among three levels of territorial governments: the MOE at the center, the Fujian provincial government and the prefectural government of Xiamen, because Xiamen is not the capital city of Fujian Province and the provincial government had also urged the lower prefectural government to share the funding responsibility. In 1994, when the common establishment agreement was first signed, Xiamen prefectural government promised to invest annually ten million RMB for the development of university infrastructure and to design matching policies to secure the staff payrolls at satisfied level (ZJNJ 1995). In 2010 the common establishment contract was extended and the ratio of funding between central and local level was 1:1, with the MOE putting 0.53 billion RMB into the university funds from 2010 to 2013 and the Fujian provincial government and Xiamen prefectural government jointly invest the same amount (0.53 billion RMB) of financial support (Chen 2011a). Certainly, the provincial governments would not have agreed on the co-funding requirements without additional benefits. With the market forces gradually introduced into the funding models, joint management could be beneficial to the local revenue as well. The central-local agreement on common establishments can also be interpreted as a deal settled through exchanges of interests between the MOE and the provincial government.

- (2) the “Province + MOE” sponsored establishments (省部共建地方高校). This type of common establishments targeted only at the universities that are affiliated to the provincial educational authorities, i.e. locally owned universities. The project was officially introduced by the MOE in 2004 (MOE 2007) and the aim was to narrow the regional gaps in the development of higher education, because many Western provinces do not have centrally-managed universities and they lack educational resources and are weak in academic achievements. Hence, the first cohort of the universities that were selected to join the “Province + MOE” common establishments, came all from less-developed provinces: Henan Province, Xinjiang Autonomous Regions, Yunnan Province, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Regions, Tibet Autonomous Regions, Ningxia

Hui Ethnic Autonomous Regions and Qinghai Province (MOE 2014). Gradually these projects were also introduced in other provinces, including the coastal developed regions. Until 2014, there are altogether 43 local universities under the “MOE + Province” common establishments (MOE 2015a).

- (3) the “MOE + Province + another ministry” common establishments (省部部共建). This type of common establishments started only in 2011 and except the MOE and the provincial government, a sector-related ministry is also involved in the joint management. The selected ministry is closely related to the university’s specific sector. For instance, the MOE, Liaoning provincial government and the Ministry of Finance signed on 27 April 2012 the agreement to jointly manage the North-East University of Finance (MOE 2015b). From 2011 to 2014, nine universities had joined the common establishments (*ibid.*).
- (4) the “MOE + sectoral ministry or SOEs” common establishments (行业部门共建)”. To date, 61 universities are jointly managed by the MOE, the sectoral ministry or the sector-related SOE (MOE 2013). Some universities have signed multiple contracts of joint management with more than one ministry and SOE (i.e., their relations to the state became multiplied through common establishments). The funding structure and the distribution of management costs among the contract members are not officially announced. The SOEs involved in the projects are expected to co-fund the research activities of the universities whose efforts will also be beneficial for the companies.

These four types of common establishment literally intensified the complexity of the university-state nexus by involving multiple actors who hold different interests in the common establishment projects. The relationships between universities and bureaucracies multiplied. Each newly established relationship equaled an official endorsement for the university status, thus reinforcing the stratification of the universities. Besides the relational distance to the central level, the universities can thus be further classified by their additional ties to the various contract partners. Moreover, many universities joined more than one common establishment projects which theoretically increased their funding sources and improved their ranking position in the university classification structure. It is thus for the locally-owned universities a strong motivation to achieve the common establishments as such. For the centrally-owned universities, the common establishments further increased their ranking by additional bureaucratic ties. They

possess not only the central affiliations, but also the bureaucratic relations to multiple ministries and sectoral industries. It means more funding sources and greater reputation.

#### **5.1.4 Excellence funding schemes of “211” and “985” programs and the transition the “double first-class university plan”**

Except the bureaucratic affiliation system and the common establishment programs, the excellence funding projects of “211” and “985” gave birth to elitisms within universities, the pinnacle of the pyramid, enjoying the highest reputation and the largest portion of central funding. Similar to the Ivy League, the elite club of Chinese universities was (and is) the dream destination of higher learning.

The initiation of the “211 Program” dates back to 1991, when the eighth “National Five-Year Plan” urged the funding of select key-point universities to reach the international standards of higher education (MOE 2006). The title “211” entails the project goal to establish in the twenty-first century one hundred first-tier universities that would be well-known worldwide. Currently, there are 112 universities nation-wide authorized with the 211 funding scheme (MOE 2005a).

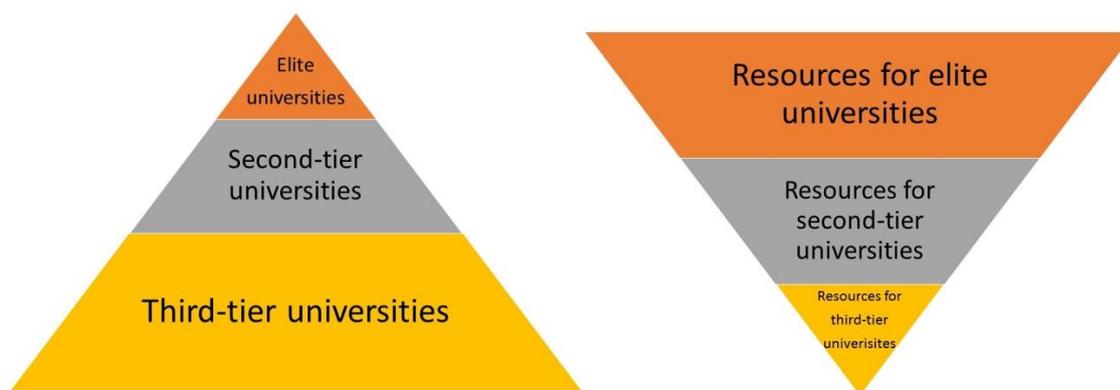
The “985 Program” emerged from the idea of then-president Jiang Zemin whose address, delivered on 4 May 1998, commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Peking University’s establishment. (Jiang 1998). The project itself was so named after the date of the president’s speech, with 98 standing for the year and 5 standing for the month. Until 2011, 39 universities were included in the “985” funding scheme (SINA 2011).

Both the excellence programs and various common establishment projects were introduced concurrently—which meant that some universities could be included in various funding programs. They gave birth to the leading universities at the top, with an array of official entitlements to ensure their outstanding and special status among the over 2000 universities in China. Centrally owned by the MOE, they signed the common establishment projects with the MOE as well as the local government, and to date remain in both “211” and “985” Programs. Although no official ranking list of universities in China existed, these entitlements became indicators to judge and evaluate a higher education institution.

The “211” and “985” titles have incurred both public and official criticism for their unintended consequences. The use of “211” and “985” was intentionally reduced in official discourse. Instead, a new entitlement program “Double First-Class University Plan” (双一流) was created in 2015 aiming to transform a number of leading universities and teaching faculties into world-class universities and disciplines by the end of 2050 (Guofa 2015: No. 64). The first round of selections was completed in 2017, with 42 universities marked as “a leading university” (一流大学) and 465 faculties from 140 universities evaluated as “a leading discipline” (一流学科) (Jiaoyanhan 2017: No. 2).

### 5.1.5 A reversed-pyramid of resource distribution and regional inequality

The classification of the universities formed a pyramid structure (see Graph 14 below), with only a small number of leading universities at the top and a large number of universities at the bottom. Education resources are distributed in reverse, with the majority of funds going to the leading universities and only a limited amount of funds allotted to second- and third-tier universities. To be sure, students’ university preferences move with the education resources.



*Graph 14: The classification of Chinese universities in pyramid form and resource distribution for universities in reversed pyramid form (by author)*

The leading universities only offer a limited number of slots each year. The distribution of these admission quotas cross-regionally is no doubt controversial. As they are entitled to more central funds and local policy support, universities are expected to shoulder greater social responsibilities. Thus, it is relatively easy to understand why the centrally funded leading universities should engage with “affirmative action” programs.

Regional distribution of the Chinese HEIs plays a key role in the decision-making of *gaokao* policies. As shown in Table 5 below, the geographical distribution of the HEIs appears ill-matched. Universities, which maintain central bureaucratic affiliations (either to the MOE or other sectoral ministries), comprise of only a small portion of the total HEIs in China. The first-tier universities are distributed unevenly across regions, too. About one-third of the MOE-universities locate in Beijing, with the rest scattered in the fewer prosperous provinces. In regions such as Henan, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan, not a single university affiliates with the MOE.

<b>Geographical Regions</b>		<b>Provinces/ Municipalities/ Autonomous Regions</b>	<b>Total number of universities located in the province</b>	<b>Number of universities affiliated to the MOE</b>	<b>Number of “211” universities</b>	<b>Number of “985” universities</b>
		<b>National Total</b>	$\Sigma = 2,595$	$\Sigma = 75$	$\Sigma = 112$	$\Sigma = 39$
<b>North China</b> <i>(huabei)</i>	1	Beijing	91	24	22	8
	2	Tianjin	55	2	4	2
	3	Hebei	120	0	0	0
	4	Shanxi	80	0	1	0
	5	Inner Mongolia AR	53	0	1	0
<b>Northeast China</b> <i>(dongbei)</i>	6	Liaoning	116	2	4	2
	7	Jilin	60	2	3	1
	8	Heilongjiang	82	1	4	1
<b>East China</b> <i>(huadong)</i>	9	Shanghai	64	8	10	4
	10	Jiangsu	166	7	11	2
	11	Zhejiang	107	1	1	1
	12	Anhui	119	1	3	1
	13	Fujian	88	1	2	1
	14	Jiangxi	98	0	1	0
	15	Shandong	144	3	3	2
<b>South Central China</b> <i>(zhongnan)</i>	16	Henan	129	0	1	0
	17	Hubei	128	7	7	2
	18	Hunan	123	2	4	3
	19	Guangdong	147	2	4	2

	20	Guangxi Zhuang AR	73	0	1	0
	21	Hainan	18	0	1	0
<b>Southwest China (xinan)</b>	22	Chongqing	65	2	2	1
	23	Sichuan	109	4	5	2
	24	Guizhou	64	0	1	0
	25	Yunnan	72	0	1	0
	26	Tibet AR	6	0	1	0
<b>Northwest China (xibei)</b>	27	Shaanxi	93	5	8	3
	28	Gansu	49	1	1	1
	29	Qinghai	12	0	1	0
	30	Ningxia Hui AR	18	0	1	0
	31	Xinjiang Uyghur AR	46	0	2	0

The statistics derive from author's own calculations based on the following governmental documents:

1. "List of Regular Colleges and Universities in China (as of 30 May 2016)"
2. "List of Universities affiliated directly to the MOE"
3. "List of Universities included in the Funding Scheme of '211 Program'"
4. "List of Universities included in the Funding Scheme of the '985 Program'"

Source: Online Archive of the Ministry of Education of the PRC.

Table 5: Geographical distribution of leading universities (MOE-affiliations, 211 and 985 universities) (by author)

"In terms of higher education, we don't use the word 'fairness' (公平), but instead, we refer to 'coordinated development' (协调发展)," as explained by one MOE official. Central funds have been transferred to less-developed provinces to balance the uneven distribution of first-tier universities (Interview 22). Given the geographical location of the universities cannot be easily changed through several projects, the central level is restrained in finding proper solutions. The provincial government remains unwilling or unable to provide sufficient financial support for the development of universities; the central funds rarely help as they remain scattered across the country.

## 5.2 The matching policies for the central policy innovation

Having introduced the key actors in the implementation system, the following sections present how the implementation of policy innovation unfolds from the central to the local levels. This

analysis focuses on the decision-making and actions taken by the implementers (including those in the local education bureaucracies and those on the frontlines).

Since the announcement of central policy innovation, relevant governmental units were required to develop matching policies to facilitate the implementation procedures at the local levels (Guofa 2014).

As discussed in Chapter 4, the content of the central policy announced four major policy changes for local experimentation in Shanghai and Zhejiang:

- (1) introducing the High School Proficiency Tests (HSPT) into *gaokao* grading system
- (2) abolishing the disciplinary dichotomy and ensuring students' individual selection of secondary test subjects
- (3) offering two chances for the English test; and
- (4) introducing the assessment mechanisms of students' comprehensive abilities (AMSCA).

In an elaborate way, the responsible bureaucratic units at the central level were called upon to draft a more detailed central document that gave guidance to the local education bureaucrats in the implementation processes.

The central guidance for the above four policy changes were summarized into two matching policies: “Opinions on the Implementation of the High School Proficiency Tests” (关于普通高中学业水平考试的实施意见) and “Opinions on the Implementation of the Assessment Mechanisms of Students' Comprehensive Abilities” (关于加强和改进普通高中学生综合素质评价的意见) (Jiaojier 2014a: No. 11; Jiaojier 2014b: No. 10). Both were announced on 10 December 2014.

In the previous analysis, I pointed out that the affected groups of the HSPT and AMSCA are the high schools (including the teaching faculties, students, and parents) with the experimentation for the policy changes taking place in the high schools ( i.e., the field of secondary education). Therefore, the central matching polices were drafted by the Department of Basic Education (Section II), but the MOE remained the policy issuer (ibid.). According to the structure of the educational bureaucracy, the documents were addressed to all the provincial

level educational bureaus alongside the vertical functional line of the MOE and they were considered as the direct supervisors and organizers for the local implementation. As previously mentioned, these policymaking and implementation processes for the *gaokao* reform were interwoven. Already before these matching policies were launched, the local high schools in Shanghai and Zhejiang had engaged with the implementation. The high schools and universities in the field sites demonstrated earlier preparations and solid arrangements of the experimentation programs. Detailed empirical data will follow in later sections.

### **5.2.1 The central matching policies as implementation guidelines for the HSPT**

The matching policy for the HSPT was filed as the No. 10 document that was drafted by the Department of Basic Education (Section II) and issued by the MOE. Prior to the *gaokao* reform, the HSPT had been used to evaluate whether high school students attained enough knowledge to graduate from secondary education. With the new reform, the HSPT scores would be used for university admissions; the new HSPT function would elevate the significance of the test results making them as important as the *gaokao* test results themselves. Therefore, the test content would be adjusted to fulfill this new function (i.e., to test the difference in students' abilities largely represented by test scores). With the announcement of the document, four main requirements for its implementation were established.

First, the MOE delegated the authority of proposing and organizing the proficiency tests to the provincial level government and the educational bureaucracy at that level (Jiaojier 2014b). In this sense, the provincial educational bureaus could set the content of test papers according to the conditions of secondary education in their own provinces.

Second, the MOE fixed the nine test subjects (Chinese, mathematics, English, politics, history, geography, physics, chemistry and biology) that would be tested for the HSPT (ibid.). Subjects such as arts (or music and painting), sports, communication technology, and information technology were (and are) optional. The provincial educational bureaus would decide how, when, and which of these test subjects would be tested and used. The students were allowed to choose three out of nine test subjects, so that the scores of the three subjects could be calculated into the total *gaokao* scores for university admissions.

Third, the MOE provided a general timetable to hold the exams and the provinces could flexibly decide the exact test dates each year. However, the time schedule was directly bound

to the high school teaching plans. Thus, the MOE required the localities to schedule the tests at the end of the semester. In normal cases, students from the tenth grade could sit for two subjects, and students from the eleventh and twelfth grades could sit for six subjects.

Fourth, the MOE established the evaluation scales. The three test subjects that would be selected by individual students would be graded from A, B, C, D, to E levels, while other test results would be shown as “pass” or “fail.” In principle, 15 percent of students are graded with A, 30 percent with B, 30 percent with C, and 25 percent with either D or E (ibid.). This evaluation scale generally aimed to achieve a normal distribution of students’ aptitudes.

The last and most important notice in the document was the submission deadline of the provincial implementation plans. By August 2015, all the provincial educational bureaus were required to finish and to submit to the MOE the implementation plans according to local conditions. These plans, in turn, were required to be recorded by the MOE (ibid.).

### **5.2.2 The central implementation guidelines for AMSCA**

The matching policy for the AMSCA was filed as the No. 11 document that was drafted by the Department of Basic Education (Section II) and issued by the MOE. It is a new assessment method that evaluates students based on their social engagement, moral attitudes, and extra-curriculum abilities. As mentioned in Chapter 3, similar evaluation criteria have existed over a long period in Chinese high schools, but it would be the first time to use the assessment results to differentiate students’ ability in the university admission process.

The guidelines for AMSCA can also be summarized in four respects:

First, the No. 11 document defined the function of the AMSCA. It was only used as a reference in university admissions (i.e., the comprehensive assessment result of individual students would be attached to their *gaokao* scores and the university admissions offices could take the assessment into consideration upon selection (Jiaojier 2014a)). Unlike the HSPT with its ability to reflect student ability quantitatively, the comprehensive ability of students could only be assessed qualitatively (i.e., one could not evaluate students’ social engagements simply by numbers). Consequently, the evaluation and assessment results for individual students would be recorded by high schools throughout the three-year duration of secondary education. The qualitative assessment could be arbitrary and ambiguous if high schools simply followed their

own educational philosophy and interpreted comprehensive ability in their own way. Furthermore, if the assessment were used to select students, the ambiguity and arbitrariness could easily generate into controversies over justice. From this perspective, the ways in which high schools established the AMSCA system and how universities used the assessment results would be vital in the implementation process.

Second, student ability is broadly categorized using five criteria and high schools must design suitable rating scales to elicit the qualitative information about student ability. The five categories are:

(1) moral and virtual quality: loyalty to the CCP, patriotism, ideals and beliefs, integrity and honesty, benevolence and friendliness, responsibility and legal compliance. The document listed an array of activities that could bring positive attributes to the students (e.g., active participation in party-related activities, community life, public beneficiary events, and other voluntary services).

(2) scholastic aptitude: academic knowledge, especially the ability of knowledge application and independent thinking for solutions. The regular exam resulted in obligatory subjects and selective curriculum could be taken as reference for the evaluation.

(3) mental and physical strength: a healthy lifestyle, regular physical exercises, sports, and mental health.

(4) artistic development: aesthetic judgement, understanding of arts, and individual expression of arts. Students' performance in music, painting, dancing, drama, traditional Chinese opera, and calligraphy would be noted in the individual assessment sheet.

(5) social practices: students' engagement in handcrafted work, internships, social observation, and reports.

Third, the assessment procedures would be divided into five stages. The high school would first create a document for each student to record their personal development of comprehensive abilities listed above. Before an entry were made into the personal record, teachers would be obliged to ensure the credibility of information proving student ability. At the end of each semester, students would sign on the personal record to confirm their agreement of the entries. Teachers can select outstanding examples of students' performances and

demonstrate them publicly. In the next stage, students' personal records and other assessment-relevant information shall be gathered and put into one file, so that it can be referred to the university offices for the entrance selection.

Fourth, similar to the HSPT matching policy, the MOE fixed a deadline for the AMSCA implementation plans and all provincial plans must arrive at the center by August 2015 (ibid).

### **5.3 Making local implementation plans and local matching policies in Shanghai and Zhejiang provinces**

This section demonstrates how the top-level policy innovation design was interpreted and implemented by Shanghai and Zhejiang governments according to local conditions. It was the central intention to experiment with policy changes in select venues; the localities were left with some discretionary space (though limited) to adapt the central policy to the local environment.

The substantial change of the reform was the diversification of student choice in test subjects. The central initiation of the “3+3 model” aimed to stimulate curriculum reform in high schools and to motivate students to choose the what they considered interesting. To realize these ambitious goals, high schools were forced to solve potential problems in everyday administration. Before the reform, students simply were divided into two groups: liberal arts and natural sciences. Administratively, they could be easily distributed and grouped into different classes, which were quite stable. Each class was an administrative unit led by a class teacher. Once the new policy was implemented, students were free to choose three secondary subjects and to establish individual timetables. Consequentially, the class as a single and stable administrative unit no longer functioned and it turns into dynamic forms, just like the system at the colleges and universities. High schools, due to limited space and resources, might not have been able to put the plan into practice. This was only one of the potential problems that the high schools in Shanghai and Zhejiang might have encountered. The intention of the central government was to experiment with these institutional changes and to see whether the localities could find innovative solutions to potential problems. For the local level, it is rightful to exert some discretionary power to adjust the central plan according to the local conditions.

As Zhou Xueguang clearly noted:

the underlying characteristic of the Chinese bureaucracy is the paradox of uniformity in policymaking and flexibility in implementation, [...] the very nature of policy uniformity foreshadows, intended or not, delegation discretion, and flexibility in implementation (Zhou 2010:55 and 61).

For the local governments, the actual space of such discretionary power decided to what extent they could be flexible with central policy innovations. As previously discussed, the localities have been haunted to be innovative to solve the local problems, but the reality shows that the local officials were increasingly reluctant to engage with innovative policies out of fear of making a mistake and their consequences. The higher levels judged the implementation. When the higher authorities acquiesced in local behavior, they were labeled as “flexible” or even “innovative”; when the higher authorities enforced their policies and did not tolerate local behavior, they were labeled as “deviant” and penalized (ibid.). Therefore, it depends on how the Shanghai and Zhejiang educational bureaucracies wielded their discretionary power to deal with the intended policy changes and to reshape the existing organizational structures to fulfill the tasks imposed on them. As Chapter 4 revealed, prior to the official launch of the new central policy, local implementation plans had been already drafted and a chain of implementation preparation works had been undertaken in Shanghai and Zhejiang.

In the following section, I present the process of making local implementation plans in Shanghai and Zhejiang, respectively. Further elaborations will be done to demonstrate how the localities responded to the central matching policies.

### **5.3.1 Shanghai: Making the implementation plans and local matching policies**

Since early 2014, the Shanghai Education Committee began drafting local implementation plans. As one interviewee from the Shanghai Education Committee revealed, the MOE gave policy instructions to both the Shanghai municipal government and the Shanghai education bureaucracy on how they should prepare for the experimentation of the *gaokao* reform (Interview 38). Thus, one could argue that the central selection of the experimentation sites was already confirmed by early 2014.

As for the preparation itself, the Shanghai Education Committee decision makers organized over 100 meetings to talk to affected groups—affected groups—including the principals of 68 universities, 262 high schools in Shanghai, responsible leaders of 17 district governments, university professors, high school teachers, representatives of the high school

student body, parents, and journalists (*ibid.*). The aim of the deliberation meetings was to maximize the convergence of vested interests among the affected groups in society and to ensure the general support for the policy implementation en masse.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Vice-Premier Liu Yandong came to Shanghai in August 2014 in order to pre-confirm the feasibility of the implementation plans and to ensure that the measures taken by localities would not result in social instability. Meanwhile, Han Zheng<sup>43</sup> convened special meetings with the standing committee members of the CCP Shanghai Municipal Committee, and Yang Xiong<sup>44</sup> held the executive meetings within the Shanghai Municipal Government to deliberate the drafts of implementation plans for the *gaokao* reform. The key decision-making procedures seemed to have taken place intensively within a short period of time.

On 10 September 2014, the Shanghai Leading Group for Deepening Reform convened an extended plenary meeting to deliberate the implementation plan of the *gaokao* reform in Shanghai and the members voted for the official release of the policy. As required, the plan was delivered to the MOE and filed as the internal policy record. Following the approval of the MOE, the municipal government and the CCP Shanghai Committee jointly launched the implementation plan for Shanghai on 19 September 2014 (Hufufa 2014) (Interview 38). In fact, the central reform plan was internally circulated much earlier than it was officially released to the public. Universities, high schools, and admission staff were invited to various internal meetings to get up-to-date implementation plans from the provincial education examination office (Interview 29 and 40). However, while the municipal government was engaging with the implementation plan, no policy expert was invited to join the deliberation or discussion (Interview 33). As for the Shanghai municipal government, the aim was to make a local plan that fulfilled the central requirements and was technically feasible for all Shanghai schools and universities. The educational bureaucrats, teachers and administrators from high schools and universities are the affected groups as well as the real implementers of the policy changes.

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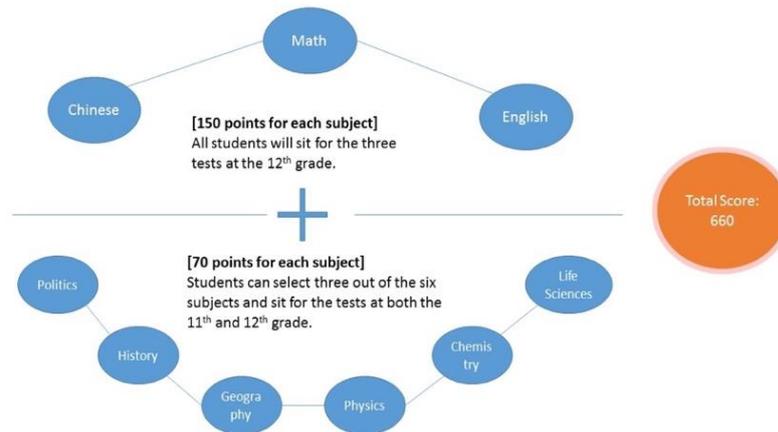
<sup>43</sup> Han Zheng was then Party Secretary of the CCP Shanghai Municipal Committee, and he was promoted after the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Party Congress and serves now as one of the seven standing committee members of the CCP Politburo and the vice-premier of the State Council.

<sup>44</sup> Yang Xiong was the then governor of the Shanghai Municipal Government and after the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP Party Congress, he was promoted to Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Economic Affairs of the National People's Congress.

Shanghai education authorities came up with an overarching plan for the implementation that followed the central No. 35 document. It clarified the “3+3” testing model by defining a Shanghai model containing three obligatory test subjects (Chinese, mathematics, and English) and the six selective test subjects (politics, history, geography, physics, chemistry, and life sciences) (see Graph 16). Students will sit for three obligatory tests and the highest possible score of each obligatory test counted as 150 points. In terms of the selected subject tests, there would be  $C_6^3=20$  possible combinations. It depended on the individual selection of which three out of the six secondary subjects. For each selected subject test, students could earn the highest score of 70 points. By adding together the full scores of the obligatory and selected subject tests, the total score came to  $(150*3) + (70*3) = 660$  points.

The major revisions in the test rules resulted in fundamental changes to the curriculum setting and to high school routines. The Shanghai experimentation began in September 2014 and the students who entered the tenth grade in autumn / winter semester 2014 would make their individual timetables according to their selection of secondary test subjects. In theory, high schools would have to be prepared for all the  $C_6^3=20$  potential subject combinations, including the coordination of classrooms, distribution of teaching staffs, and the consultation for students’ personal development.

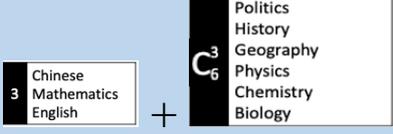
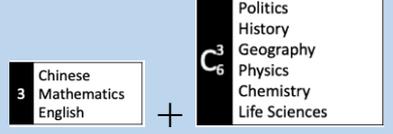
I present the fieldwork data in Shanghai in the next section. It reveals how the local high schools (i.e., the immediate policy implementers) reacted to and tackled these substantial changes and how the existing operational structure in high schools adapted to and reshaped local solutions.



Graph 15: Shanghai's implementation plan for gaokao reform (by author)

Except the general implementation plan, the Shanghai Education Committee simultaneously designed local matching policies according to the central matching policies, guiding the administrative process for the introduction of the HSPT and the AMSCA in Shanghai. On 15 April 2015—four months earlier than the deadline set by the MOE—the Shanghai Education Committee released two local matching policies: the No. 30 document “Shanghai’s Implementation Measures for the Assessment Mechanisms of Students’ Comprehensive Abilities in Secondary Education,” laying out the key principles and rules for the operational procedures in establishing the AMSCA mechanisms (Hujiaoweiji 2015a), and the No. 31 document “Shanghai’s Implementation Measures for the High Schools Proficiency Test,” delineating the bureaucratic arrangements and its collaboration with high schools in terms of the introduction of HSPT (Hujiaoweiji 2015b).

	Central Policy	Local Implementation Plans (Shanghai)
Delegation	Organizational authority delegated to the provincial level.	Provincial-level education bureaus in charge of the implementation of policy innovation; The additional financial costs for the implementation of the policy changes shall be totally covered by annual education budgets in Shanghai.
Test rules for school-leaving certification	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">3 Chinese Mathematics English</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">6 Politics History Geography Physics Chemistry Biology</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">4 Arts Sports General Technology Information Technology</div> </div> <p>3 + 6 + 4 (optional tests) = 13 subjects</p>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: flex-start;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">3 Chinese Mathematics English</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">6 Politics History Geography Physics Chemistry Life Sciences</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">4 Arts Sports Labor Skills Information Technology</div> </div> <p>3 + 6 + 4 (optional tests) = 13 subjects The test organization for the four optional tests is delegated to individual high schools.</p>

<b>Test rules for <i>gaokao</i> admission</b>	 <p>3 + 3 Model</p>	 <p>3 + C<sub>6</sub><sup>3</sup> Model Biology is replaced by life sciences</p>
<b>Test papers</b>	<p>According to national standardized curriculum modules</p>	<p>According to national standardized curriculum modules, with local adjustments of supplementary curriculum</p>
<b>Time and Schedules</b>	<p>Tenth grade: ~ 2 subject tests Eleventh grade: ~ 6 subject tests Twelfth grade: ~ 6 subject tests</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fixed rules for local educational authority: to provide test opportunities for all subjects to fulfill the different needs of students</li> <li>• Test schedules to be put at the end of the semester</li> <li>• Fixed rules for high schools: to orient the teaching plans according to the test schedules and students' preferences</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To provide two test opportunities for English test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students can only sit the three selected tests for <i>gaokao</i> after they've passed the school-leaving tests for the three subjects.</li> <li>• Tenth grade (end of summer semester): school-leaving tests for Information Technology, Geography and Life sciences</li> <li>• Eleventh grade (end of summer semester): school-leaving tests for Information Technology, Geography, Politics, History, Physics and Chemistry</li> <li>• Eleventh grade (end of May): qualification tests for <i>gaokao</i> admission: Geography, Life Sciences</li> <li>• Twelfth grade (end of winter semester): school-leaving tests for Chinese, Mathematics and English</li> <li>• Twelfth grade (end of April): Politics, History, Physics, Chemistry, Geography, and Life Sciences</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The alternative appointment for English qualification test for <i>gaokao</i> is scheduled in January every year. The usual <i>gaokao</i> schedule for English remains in June.</li> </ul>
<b>Grading and Scores</b>	<p>For <b>school-leaving qualifications</b>: tests will be only graded with “failed” or “passed”.</p> <hr/> <p>For the <b>3 selected subjects</b>, test results will be scored in A, B, C, D, E levels, which shall represent a normal distribution of students' aptitudes, i.e.:</p> <p>A level: 15% B level: 30% C level: 30% D and E level together: 25% (E level = failed)</p>	<p>For <b>school-leaving qualifications</b>: tests will be only graded with “failed” or “passed”.</p> <hr/> <p>For the <b>3 selected subjects</b>, the method “grading on a curve”<sup>45</sup> is employed to grade students based on their performance relative to the same cohort as a whole. According to order of the numeric test results, students are graded in 11 levels: A+, A, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, E. The students will obtain the corresponding scores of the level they have been graded. The relative scores will be counted into the total scores of the <i>gaokao</i> exam.</p>

<sup>45</sup> “Curving” defines grades according to the distribution of student scores. Grades are determined after all student scores for the test are assigned. Curving assigns grades to students based on their performance relative to the class as a whole (Hall 2013). The method is used to ensure that students are assessed relative to their peers. Numeric scores will be assigned first to the students, but the absolute values are less relevant. The order of the scores is more important, as it corresponds to the relative performance of each student. According to the pre-determined grade distribution (as the percentiles shown in the table), students will be graded from A to E levels and assigned to the corresponding scores of each level that will be counted into the total *gaokao* scores.

	A: 15%		B: 30%			C: 30%			D: 20%		E: 5%
	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	
Level	A+	A	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	E
Score	70	67	64	61	58	55	52	49	46	43	40

Test results are valid for two years.

Table 6: Discretionary space measured by comparing the content of implementation plans as that of the central policy innovation (by author)

By analyzing the policy content, one can identify the differences of the central and local policies demonstrating how the Shanghai Education Commission executed its discretionary power in the implementation process. Table 6 juxtaposes the content of central documents and the local documents measuring its discretionary space. It reflects how local education authorities in Shanghai interpreted the central policy documents and replenished the central guidance with more detailed operational measures for high schools and universities. To a large extent, the education authority in Shanghai obediently and faithfully interpreted the central documents. The settings for test subjects and test rules were almost identical, except small local modifications that compensated the local traditions of subject names (e.g., the subject of biology is named “life sciences,” while the subject of general technology is named “labor skills”). The curriculum arrangement for these subjects remained consistent with the central standardized modules that would be applied nationwide. The discretionary space was relatively compressed when the central government defined who does what, who paid what, and how rules would be executed. However, the Shanghai Education Committee tried to localize the central guidance by clarifying the operational procedures in favor of the interests of students. For example, the second appointment for English qualification test for *gaokao* was scheduled in January each year. The decision was made by the then director of the Shanghai Education Committee, who insisted on setting the test appointment according to the English teaching plans in the Shanghai high schools. He argued that students must have finished all the required curricula before the test appointment. Otherwise, it would have been meaningless to offer another opportunity for the students. January usually ended the winter semester and students of the twelfth grade already learned grammar and text production techniques by that time (Interview 38). It was at to his insistence that the Test Authority in Shanghai needed to compromise and rearrange their existing schedules for various other tests taking place around the same time period.

As presented in Chapter 3, the local test authorities not only organized tests related to formal schooling and university admissions, but they also were responsible for various

certification tests. January was a busy month for them, as it was shortly before spring festival when teaching faculty were occupied by tedious organizational tasks for other tests (ibid.). The implementation plan in Shanghai was actually a result of bargaining within the local education bureaucracy, as different bureaucratic units from the Shanghai education system possess distinctive interests. In the process of realizing policy changes, the resistance usually arose from the real implementers who worked on the front lines and confronted the dramatic changes in their everyday jobs. Without the persistence of the paramount leader of the Shanghai Education Committee, the test appointment would have very likely been arranged in favor of administrative routines.

### **5.3.2 Zhejiang: Implementation plan and local matching policies**

Similar to Shanghai, Zhejiang Province started their implementation plans much earlier than the release of the central policy innovation. My Zhejiang Testing Authority interviewee described the process as an interaction between the central and local government (Interview 32). Expert groups had been in Zhejiang two or three times to collect local ideas and suggestions; and they delivered the “center’s spirit” (中央精神) at meetings so that local authorities could make plans according to the central spirit. Moreover, representatives of the Zhejiang educational authorities traveled several times to Beijing to present their visions of local implementation (ibid.). In Zhejiang, the education authorities had already started with the making of local plans since July 2013. Having received the central policy spirit from experts, they additionally referred to the following policy documents:

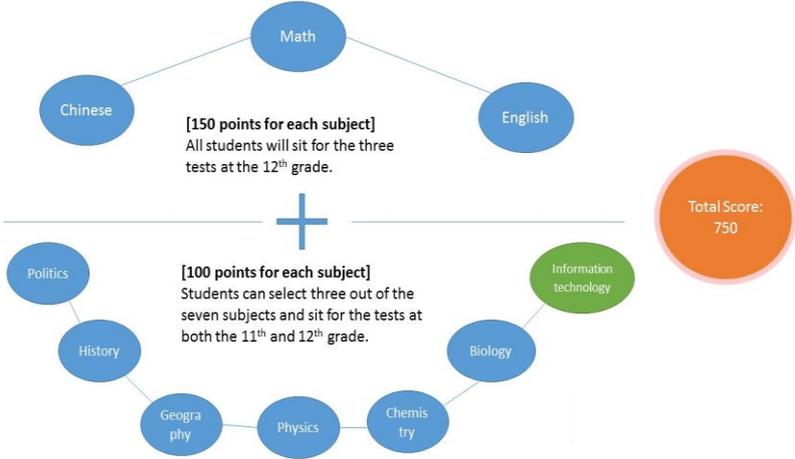
- “Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform”
- “Outline of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development”

The director of the Zhejiang Education Bureau was responsible for making local plans. He established a team consisting of staff from the Department of Basic Education, researchers from the provincial education research institutes, Department of Higher Education, and the Zhejiang Testing Authority. Indeed, the Testing Authority played a leading role in the decision-making process (ibid.)

Similar to Shanghai, the authorities in Zhejiang also excluded education experts from the local decision-making process for local plans. As my interviewee revealed, all high school

principals and university principals in Zhejiang were invited to deliberation meetings and, if necessary, the representatives of the Zhejiang People’s Congress were asked to participate in the discussions so that the voices from the society could be heard (ibid.)

The implementation plan in Zhejiang Province, as illustrated in Graph 16 below, differed from the Shanghai plan. While Shanghai offered six subjects for selection, Zhejiang added a seventh subject: “information technology.” As the staff from the Provincial Testing Authority told me, Zhejiang was a pioneer to introduce “information technology” into the curriculum for *gaokao* testing purposes as far back as 2009 (Interview 32). While drafting the local implementation plans, Zhejiang definitely would highlight its strengths and continued with a more comprehensive testing package. However, one more subject test made the subject combinations grow to  $C_7^3 = 35$ . As each selected subject test contained 100 points and each of the primary subject test contained 150 points, the total score for individual students would be:  $(150*3) + (100*3) = 750$  points (see Graph 16).

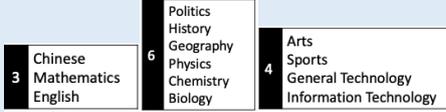
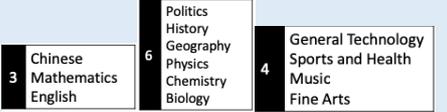
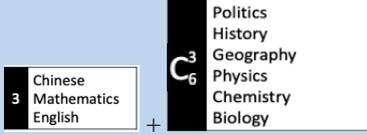
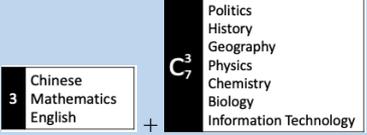


Graph 16: Zhejiang's implementation plan for gaokao reform (by author)

Similar to the situation in Shanghai, high schools in Zhejiang coped with an array of administrative challenges in the newly revised *gaokao* examination rules. However, Zhejiang Province was geographically much larger than Shanghai, while in terms of local matching policies, the Zhejiang Education Bureau aimed to develop guidelines that were workable for high schools. After all, regardless of location or resource level, high schools were required to comply with the same policy changes and implementation packages for the HSPT and the AMSCA in compliance with the goals of central policy innovation.

On 7 November 2014, the Zhejiang Test Authority released the local matching policy for the implementation of the HSPT: “Zhejiang’s Implementation Measures for the High School Proficiency Test” (Zhejiaokao 2014: No. 129). Zhejiang issued their local matching policy almost six months earlier than Shanghai. The matching policy for the AMSCA came five months later. On the 13 April 2015, the Section of Basic Education (under the Zhejiang Education Bureau) issued the local matching policy for AMSCA: “Opinions on the Optimization of the Record of Student Development and the Assessment Mechanisms of Students’ Comprehensive Abilities in Zhejiang” (Zhejiaoji 2015: No. 45). Both documents were released before the deadline set by the MOE.

The table below presents how the local government in Zhejiang interpreted the central policy and put it into the local implementation guidance.

	Central Policy	Local Implementation Plans (Zhejiang)
<b>Delegation</b>	Organizational authority delegated to the provincial level.	Provincial Test Authority is in charge of the implementation of HSPT. The Section of Basic Education is in charge of the implementation of the AMSCA. It is not clearly defined in the local plans, who will cover the financial costs for the implementation.
<b>Test rules for school-leaving certification</b>	 <p>3 + 6 + 4 (optional tests) = 13 subjects</p>	 <p>3 + 6 + 4 = 13 subjects The test paper for English will be proposed by the National Test Authority in Beijing. Other tests will be organized by the Provincial Testing Authority.</p>
<b>Test rules for <i>gaokao</i> admission</b>	 <p>3 + 3 Model</p>	 <p>3 + C<sub>7</sub><sup>3</sup> Model “Information Technology” is added as the seventh test subject for individual selection.</p>
<b>Test papers</b>	According to national standardized curriculum modules	According to national standardized curriculum modules, with local adjustments of supplementary curriculum

<b>Time and Schedules</b>	<p>Tenth grade: ~ 2 subject tests Eleventh grade: ~ 6 subject tests Twelfth grade: ~ 6 subject tests</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fixed rules for local educational authority: to provide test opportunities for all subjects to fulfill the different needs of students</li> <li>• Test schedules to be put at the end of the semester</li> <li>• Fixed rules for high schools: to orient the teaching plans according to the test schedules and students' preferences</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To provide two test opportunities for English test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For each test subject, school-leaving tests and qualification tests for <i>gaokao</i> will be scheduled on the same date and same time, while the students who sit the qualification tests need to finish additional questions in another 30 minutes.</li> <li>• The tests will take place every April and October (no English test in April).</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The alternative appointment for English qualification test for <i>gaokao</i> is scheduled in <b>October</b> every year. The usual <i>gaokao</i> schedule for English remains in June.</li> </ul>																																																																					
<b>Grading and Scores</b>	<p>For <b>school-leaving qualifications</b>: tests will be only graded with “failed” or “passed”.</p> <hr/> <p>For the <b>3 selected subjects</b>, test results will be scored in A, B, C, D, E levels, which shall represent a normal distribution of students' aptitudes, i.e.: A level: 15% B level: 30% C level: 30% D and E level together: 25% (E level = failed)</p>	<p>For <b>school-leaving qualifications</b>: all tests will be only graded into five levels: A, B, C, D and E, while the actual scores can be checked through online platforms.</p> <hr/> <p>For the <b>qualification tests for <i>gaokao</i></b>, Zhejiang also applies the method of “grading on a curve”. Zhejiang defines a different curve by distributing the students into 21 levels.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Level</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>9</th> <th>10</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Score</td> <td>100</td> <td>97</td> <td>94</td> <td>91</td> <td>88</td> <td>85</td> <td>82</td> <td>79</td> <td>76</td> <td>73</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Proportion (%)</td> <td>1</td> <td>2</td> <td>3</td> <td>4</td> <td>5</td> <td>6</td> <td>7</td> <td>8</td> <td>7</td> <td>7</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Level</th> <th>11</th> <th>12</th> <th>13</th> <th>14</th> <th>15</th> <th>16</th> <th>17</th> <th>18</th> <th>19</th> <th>20</th> <th>21</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Score</td> <td>70</td> <td>67</td> <td>64</td> <td>61</td> <td>58</td> <td>55</td> <td>52</td> <td>49</td> <td>46</td> <td>43</td> <td>40</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Proportion (%)</td> <td>7</td> <td>7</td> <td>7</td> <td>7</td> <td>6</td> <td>5</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> <td>2</td> <td>1</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Test results are valid for two years.</p>	Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Score	100	97	94	91	88	85	82	79	76	73	Proportion (%)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	7	7	Level	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	Score	70	67	64	61	58	55	52	49	46	43	40	Proportion (%)	7	7	7	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	1
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Table 7: Discretionary space measured by central policy content and local implementation plan in Zhejiang Province (by author)

Table 7 shows that the Zhejiang plan—to a large extent—followed the central policy content. In order to simplify the implementation process, Zhejiang came up with a rough timetable for the HSPT and the *gaokao* qualification tests. In order to minimize the administrative efforts to realize the policy changes, Zhejiang proposed a smart solution: the school-leaving tests and the qualification tests (for the selected test subjects) for each subject would take place simultaneously, with those who sit for the qualification test spending an additional 30 minutes to finish extra questions.

However, Zhejiang enjoyed less flexibility in making local plans relying more on the central authorities in Beijing given that students in Zhejiang still took part in the national

standardized *gaokao* tests (i.e., tests could not be independently proposed by the Zhejiang Test Authority).

The discretionary power in Zhejiang was constrained by the administrative structure of the educational bureaucracy and the existing institutional settings.

Several clues in the local plans supported this conclusion. First, the document for HSPT implementation was drafted and issued by the Zhejiang Test Authority, whereas the directly affected implementers were high schools under the supervision of the Section for Basic Education of the Zhejiang Education Bureau. Referring back to the *tiao-kuai* administrative structure analysis, it is plausible to suggest that the Central Test Authority (the *tiao-* or the vertical line) exerted a stronger impact on the Zhejiang Provincial Authority than the Zhejiang Education Bureau (the *kuai-* or horizontal line). Nationally standardized test papers were proposed by the Central Test Authority and an array of administrative routines could not be solved merely in Zhejiang. Concurrently, the Central Test Authority supervised other provinces that also applied the nationally standardized test for the *gaokao*. From this perspective, Zhejiang's choices became limited. However, the Zhejiang Education Bureau was not fully ignored; the administrative dependence on the Central Test Authority did not allow them to interfere and struggled for dramatic changes that might have generated unexpected consequences on other provinces that did not start with the policy innovation. Many test rules could not only be changed in Zhejiang because it was experimenting with the policy innovation.

Second, the alternative date for the English test was set in October each year. It was the beginning of the winter and full semester. The students had yet to finish the full curriculum for English. Teachers and educators in Zhejiang would have been aware of the problem, as the students would have encountered enormous difficulties to prepare for the test without proper instruction. Nevertheless, the local authorities chose to schedule the test date in October despite the complexity that students will have to face. One thing is clear: the test appointment needed to be settled based on mutual alignment with the Central Test Authority that must propose the test paper prior to the test date. Indeed, the decision depended on the timetable of colleagues in Beijing.

### 5.3.3 The reactions of the university admissions office

Despite the fact that policy innovation was only under experimentation in Shanghai and Zhejiang, policy shifts would have influenced the university admissions offices nationwide. As long as a university enrolled student from Shanghai and Zhejiang Provinces, it needed to create an entirely new catalogue specifying the admission requirements for each major. Prior to reform, the admission offices only looked at the *gaokao* score in order to enroll students. Following the innovation, students could select three test subjects, a connection between high school students and universities was built. If a student were to study medicine, he first would have needed to check the catalogue of his or her favorite medical school in order to see the requirements.

During fieldwork in 2014 and 2015, I conducted three interviews with university admissions officers. Two were in Shanghai and another in Sichuan. Surprisingly, the universities followed a similar tactic in setting the admission requirements. In order to attract sufficient applications, university admissions officers played defensively by requiring only one test subject as the admission threshold (Interview 28, 29, and 43). By so doing, students freely chose two other test subjects to fulfill the new 3+3 selection rules.

The university admission offices in Shanghai were also intensively involved in the decision-making for the local implementation plans. Already in 2013, the directors of the admissions offices were invited to join the internal deliberations at the Shanghai Education Committee, and they were all informed about the firm intention of *gaokao* reform and how those changes might influence the work in higher education admission. A non-disclosure agreement was signed at the deliberations. After the meetings, the staff of university admission offices started immediately to gather all faculty directors to propose suggestions and opinions on how the catalogue could be made so that at least it would not negatively influence the attractiveness of the university or a specific major (Interview 28 and 29).

In principle, the university admissions offices aimed to maintain the status quo (i.e., to make the changes in a way that generated minimum impact on a student's choice of majors). To obtain eligible application access to a specific major, the universities mostly set one test subject as required (Interview 28, 2, and 43). For example, the university admissions office set *biology* as the required test subject for the eligible application for *medicine*, then the students

who wanted to study *medicine* at university must choose *biology* as one of three selected test subjects. The other two could be decided freely by the applicants. On the one hand, the admissions officers wanted to keep the number of applicants by leaving them enough flexibility and larger space for personal choice., On the other hand, the admissions officers tried to fulfill the central goals by signaling that students should pay more attention to what they wanted to study, rather than at which university they wanted to study. An interesting outcome of this policy innovation was that the universities created—albeit unintendedly—a certain type of solidarity in the implementation. The pursued tactic turned out to be the most efficient and safest approach to implement the policy changes without imposing extra pressure on students.

However, it is estimated that, in the long run, individual faculties of the universities will face enormous pressure due to the changes in the admissions rules. Previously, students could apply for a specific university with three majors placed on their priority lists. If a student could not obtain a high enough score for first-place prioritization in major, the university admission office was within its rights to dispatch the student to other faculties (known in Chinese as *tiáojiè*, or 调剂). On most occasions, students were distributed to less-than-popular faculties. Post-reforms, students applied for a specific major and the admissions officers were powerless to distribute students based on the interests of the university. Thus, the direct impact on the weakest and most poorly-equipped faculties was a drastic loss of students (Interview 32).

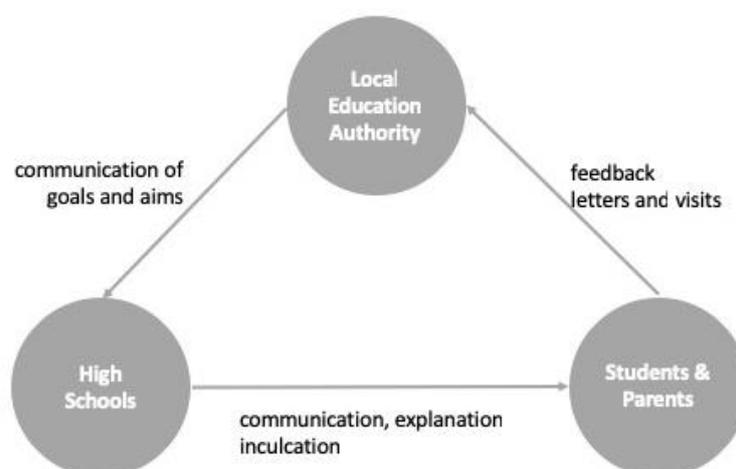
#### **5.4 Implementation behaviors in Shanghai and Zhejiang: Tactical implementation, feedback loops and amendments of the Zhejiang implementation plan**

In the section, I analyze the behavior of the high schools in Zhejiang and Shanghai. For the high school administrations, two challenges arose: how to realize policy change based on limited resources and how to make teachers, students, and parents cooperate. To be sure, everyone—whether desired or not—needed to change, but no one was easily convinced that what they were doing was *right*. In the following sections, I elaborate on their behavior based on qualitative interviews conducted in three high schools in Shanghai and Zhejiang. These analyses emphasize three behavioral patterns that are shared in the high schools: (1) the triangular relationships between the local education authority, the high schools, and the students (parents), (2) the technical feasibility, and (3) the restructuring of school resources.

### 5.4.1 The triangular relationship: Information exchange and tactical responses

The three high schools that I visited during fieldwork in Shanghai and Zhejiang happen to be municipal-level key schools. At the time of fieldwork (November 2015), the first generation of students affected by the policy change was already in the eleventh grade. They had made their decision on the three selected test subjects and started to prepare for the qualification tests for *gaokao*.

All three high schools were aware of the policy shifts between 2013 and 2014, as the school principals and responsible administrators participated in a series of deliberation meetings and hearings during the experts' fieldwork in Shanghai and Zhejiang (Interview 39, 40, and 42). While the experts were gathering information from the localities in order to draft the central policy, the local education authorities already allied with local high schools to discuss the plans. Graph 17 below shows the triangular relationship between the local education authority, the high schools, and the students / parents. The first step in local implementation was mobilization. The local education authority passed on the goals and aims to the high school administrations, but considering different situations of the high schools, the local authority allowed for individual solutions (Interview 40). All three high schools chose to inform the affected students and parents at a very early stage. The high schools needed to be careful in mobilizing the students and parents, who could, in unpleasant situations, complain directly to the local authorities through the official channel of "letters and visits (信访)".



Graph 17: Communication exchanges between local education authority, high schools and students and parents (by author)

Different high schools took different approaches to communicate with students and parents. In one of the high schools in Shanghai, the vice principal and responsible teachers spent weeks analyzing the information collected from the university admissions office and the education authorities. The affected students and parents were invited to the special “parent-teacher meetings” (PTM 家长会). The school administration seemed to be transparent at the meetings and tried to nurture a sense of trust by insisting that the school was always on the side of the students. The school administrations shared analyses of how university admissions offices made the new admission rules. The high schools conducted accurate calculations based on the new admission requirements of 1,096 majors. The results were shared with the students so that they could make their own decision on the selected test subjects. The class teachers offered assistance and promised the parents that their children would not be victims of reform. The change of the *gaokao* rules affected everyone and if the parents actively cooperated with the school, students could make use of the changes and enter their dream university (Interview 40).

In a high school in Zhejiang, a school administration tried to create solidarity among students and parents. The school administration gathered together affected students and parents, explaining the changes in a detailed way. External experts were hired with off-budget funds to explain to the parents and students how each test subject was developed in the scientific world and how the disciplinary knowledge could be applied in practice. The students were required to take additional weekend and holiday courses to increase awareness of individual selection within their personal career path (Interview 42).

So far as the interviews in Shanghai and Zhejiang revealed, students and parents from three high schools acted cooperatively in the implementation process and the local education authorities had no record of complaints from parents up to November 2015 (ibid.).

#### **5.4.2 Technical feasibility of policy implementation in high schools**

Technical feasibility indicates the operational workability and compatibility of the policy innovation in a given high school context. High schools in China, as explained before, differ greatly from each other due to bureaucratic affiliations, local economic conditions, and traditions of disciplinary focus. The institutional context of a high school directly decided the operational compatibility of the new policy. Some high schools in developed regions only

accommodated six or eight classes per grade, whereas other high schools in rural areas maintained twelve to fourteen classes with over 50 students sitting in one classroom (Interview 41). If the students made individual choices for test subjects, they would have an individual timetable, like at universities, they are no longer fixed in one class unit (i.e., students must be reshuffled and put into different classrooms based on their own choices). However, the students still needed to return to the administrative class (行政班) for Chinese, English and mathematics—these were the obligatory subjects that every student took. So, the core feasibility challenge for high schools was that they were not ready to transform themselves into a “semi-university.” If a high school did not have enough classrooms or enough teachers for the selected subjects, it was almost impossible to realize the policy innovation as intended. In other words, students would have to compromise in the subject selection to cope with the new reality of high schools. Shanghai and Zhejiang were economically well developed. The three interviewed high schools happened to be key schools. Having mobilized the students and parents, the high schools started to solve the key problem of reform: students’ individual selection of test subjects.

The high school in Shanghai created a slogan “when there is a chance to choose, learn how to choose, and respect your choice” (有选择, 学会选择, 尊重选择). Already before the semester started in September 2014, the school ran several rounds of simulations for subject selection so that the administration could obtain a rough idea of how many students would choose which subjects. In the winter semester (first semester) of the tenth grade, teachers sent out questionnaires to their students and collected feedback. In the summer semester of the tenth grade, students had to make the final decision on subject selection; and everyone was required to sign a form of subject selection. The selection was permanent and binding. After the final decision was made, the administration collected the forms and calculated the results. Another month passed to create individualized timetables and to coordinate the classrooms for every subject. The school principal was proud that the faculty and staff found a way to re-organize the classrooms and to re-allocate personnel according to student selection (Interview 40). In the meantime, the district educational bureaus held regular meetings to review the progress in each high school; these meetings were optimal platforms for school principals to brainstorm with others about problems and potential solutions. As one teacher from the high school stated: it was due to the professionalism and resources of the school that allowed implementation to go

smoothly. In other high schools, students could only select from rigidly determined subject combinations, and the  $C_6^3 = 20$  combinations could not be freely selected by students (ibid.).

The high school in Zhejiang followed a similar approach as Shanghai in solving problems caused by subject selection. The key task for high schools was inculcation. The students understood the importance of personal decisions and the responsibilities involved. Teachers assisted students in making personal decisions and the school administration invited external experts to provide professional guidance about personal development. As the high school in Zhejiang was much larger in scale, the teachers for IT classes were assigned to develop specific software for students to select test subjects. The software was used on a web-based platform whereby students were able to change selections until they made a final decision to submit choices. As the selection in Zhejiang was more complicated, with  $C_7^3 = 35$  combinations, in order to make the students' timetables compatible with the distribution of classrooms, high schools consulted external software developers to design school-specific programs. The financial costs were covered by the high schools.

As the school principal in Shanghai summarized in his interview with me: “there is always a way to solve technical problems (技术问题总会有办法的)” (Interview 40). The high schools—no matter how much financial support they received, how many classrooms they had or how diverse the selection combinations were—always found a solution. The difference lay in the quality of the solution—the quality of which directly tied to student performance in the *gaokao* tests.

#### **5.4.3 Resource distribution: Mutually exclusive, collectively exhausted**

Resources include monetary resources and manpower (i.e., teachers and training coaches). The first question to be answered is: From where do the resources derive? As noted, the center would not offer any financial aid in the local implementation of the policy innovation. Therefore, Shanghai and Zhejiang needed to solve these financial problems with local revenue.

In general, high schools were directly under the supervision of county-level education bureaus—all responsible for the remuneration of teachers and their operational budgets. The high school principals in Shanghai enjoyed the annual salary system, whereas their teaching staff received a monthly salary based on local income schemes of the education system

(Interview 40). One high school in Shanghai revealed that it was forced at one point to rent its real estate assets in order to cover its operating expenses—a situation that later improved with a government-granted increase in its educational budget (*ibid.*). In order to cover the costs for implementation, the high schools remained dependent on financial transfers from the local government. Since the policy innovation was launched, education authorities in Shanghai increased budgets for teaching staff, especially for selected subjects that were not required under the pre-reform *gaokao* system (Interview 38). During my fieldwork, these schools never publicly expressed any concerns about money, although they needed to spend a great deal of time and money to train their teachers. As Shanghai and Zhejiang were (and remain) economically well-developed, the high schools could afford the additional costs of experimentation. In resource-poor regions, high school administrations might have been concerned about the implementation. This was a key factor that could not be tested through the experimentation in Shanghai and Zhejiang.

As explained earlier, the high schools implemented changes by finding solutions. The difference lay in how the high schools localized the reform packages with the available resources. Although the three high schools took different measures to distribute their resources, they all followed one tactic: mutually exclusively, collectively exhausted—or as one school principal said: “we must make full use of everything” (物尽其用) (Interview 40).

One of the high schools in Shanghai was an all boarding school, where students lived on campus during weekdays and returned home on weekends. The administrative staff, who were actually responsible for dormitory life and guidance counseling, joined the implementation team because the staff knew the students better than the teachers and they could offer suggestions when students felt puzzled or confused about important decisions (Interview 39). Furthermore, the school engaged with several innovative programs for years, which encouraged teachers to act like university professors and led students in conducting lab experiments. When preparing for the new HSPT tests, the school aimed to make use of the well-developed connection between students and project supervisors, and the classes for the selected subjects were transformed into a form of university lecture (i.e., the students switched classrooms, whereas the teachers announced the time and place for the lecture) (*ibid.*).

All the school principals emphasized that the key to success was teacher training, as most work was realized by class teachers and subject teachers. The teachers from the three high schools attended both school-based courses and information briefings at the local authorities. Various training courses were offered by the local authorities to explain the details of the reform. On the one hand, the curriculum needed to be adjusted and the teaching plans needed refinement. On the other hand, the teachers took on additional responsibilities for students' selection of test subjects. When students felt confused and parents felt unsure about the selection, it was always the class teacher who was expected to offer professional advice (Interview 39, 40, and 42). The front-line teachers were the most affected and stressed group in the process. Their pressure derived not only from students and parents, but also from the school administration and the local education authority. Teachers themselves wanted to realize the implementation "peacefully," without any mistakes and without any negative consequences to the students' *gaokao* results. When I asked one interviewee from the education authority how he personally evaluated the policy innovation, he said: "there is no other way; we must do it."

## **5.5 From experimentation to innovation pioneers: Knowledge sharing and experience-diffusion**

While the center had appointed Shanghai and Zhejiang to experiment with policy innovation, the local education authorities were assigned with additional tasks in knowledge sharing and experience diffusion.

During the process of making local implementation plans, the education bureaucrats from Shanghai and Zhejiang intensively exchanged information through formal and informal channels. Due to the proximity of the two locations, any action or change in one place could be spread quickly to another. During field trips, the bureaucrats from Shanghai and Zhejiang education authorities frequently referred to information they gathered from friends and colleagues at official meetings, conferences, and other occasions within the educational system (Interview 32 and 38).

The knowledge sharing the diffusion would exceed the borders of the two experimentation sites. Since Shanghai and Zhejiang officially announced their local implementation plans, education authorities from other provinces started to examine

possibilities to learn from their experiences (Interview 41). Traditionally, the local bureaucracies of the pilot projects were responsible for communications of local experiences, organizing visits of the cadre delegations from other provinces. However, in the case of educational policy innovations, the real implementers were the front-line teachers who could share first-hand information and practical solutions. Therefore, the delegations from other provinces aimed to visit the high schools instead of local education bureaucracies. One interesting finding was that the private sector played a key role in connecting the education authorities from other provinces with the high schools in Shanghai and Zhejiang.

During my fieldwork in Shanghai, a university professor—who was also my interview partner—informed me of a business startup that specialized in educational innovation and bridging the regional education gap. After I called the manager of the startup company and explained to him my doctoral research, he immediately invited me to join a training program that he organized for a delegation from a provincial education bureau. The training consisted of lectures and high school visits, aiming to demonstrate how policy innovation was implemented in Shanghai and Zhejiang. The delegation was composed of cadres and bureaucrats of the provincial education authorities as well as high school principals. Through personal networks, the manager invited some retired bureaucrats from Shanghai Education Committee to give lectures on the management skills needed for secondary education. The delegation members appeared more concerned with how implementation plans were designed and how various interest groups were counterbalanced in the decision-making process. The details of the decision-making process for local implementation that were presented in the previous sections mainly derived from these lectures. After the two days of lectures, the delegation paid visits to three high schools that I mentioned in the last section. All members, especially the high school principals from the delegation, said that they learned the most through visits to these high schools because they could talk to those who were basically doing the same job they did, and they knew what the most difficult part of the implementation would be.

During the training, I asked the manager of the startup two questions: how he built his networks in the education system and who paid the costs for the training programs. For the first question, he was reluctant to answer. For the second, he answered without hesitation. To a

certain extent, the local governments—insofar as he approached them—were willing to outsource the organizational tasks to an entrusted company in the private sector. Before this training, he organized five sessions for the cadre delegation from other provinces. However, the training budget was controlled by the provincial education authority. For each itemized expense, there was a limit. The manager revealed that the approved budget for accommodation was so small that he had serious problems in finding a proper hotel for the delegation in Shanghai (Interview 41).

## **5.6 Midterm feedbacks and evaluating the implementation performance**

In December 2015, more than one year after the policy was implemented in Shanghai and Zhejiang, the center started with the midterm evaluation. Specialists and education experts were dispatched to Shanghai and Zhejiang to collect first-hand information from the local implementers (Interview 36). The evaluation procedures were headed by the Central Leading Group for Education Reform. My interview partner rejected my request to join the evaluation sessions in Shanghai and Zhejiang given that it was conducted behind closed doors and that the feedback would be sent directly to the central leaders.

Nevertheless, it soon became apparent that a series of negative consequences would emerge in the course of local implementation. Emanating from a government spokesperson, the Chinese mass media successively exposed the critical problems caused by the changing *gaokao* test rules. The problems had emerged over time. The policy innovation elicited a domino effect in the entire educational system with changes needing to be carefully crafted based on a thorough assessment of counterpart behavior in the system. Therefore, the strategic reactions gradually formed distinctive behavioral patterns that seemed to be optimal solutions to accommodate policy change. In the eyes of the central leadership and of the public, this strategic behavior ran counter to the initial policy intent. As early as October 2016, the Zhejiang Education Bureau openly criticized the actions taken by the high schools and released a government circulation as a form of warning letter: “To rectify the Erroneous Implementation Measures of Some High Schools that Work against the Educational Rules and Curriculum Plans” (浙江省教育厅办公室关于纠正部分普通高中学校违背教育规律和教学要求错误做法的通知) (Zhejiaobanji 2016: No. 97). In this circulation, the Zhejiang Education Bureau

explicitly noted five behavioral points that were regarded as an abuse of discretion in local implementation:

“First, some high schools created an extremely condensed teaching plan for the tenth grade (the first year of secondary education), so that students could complete the HSPT school-leaving tests as early as possible. In some extreme situations, high schools even set over eight subject courses in one semester. Thus, students were placed under a much higher burden than before.

Second, some high schools restricted students’ selection of HSPT subject combinations. In some cases, the schools limited the timetable for personal selection submissions. In other cases, the schools enforced pre-designed selection packages to reduce the scope of selection.

Third, some high schools employed so-called ‘black and white timetables’ (阴阳课表) to replace class hours of optional courses with those of HSPT subjects. The problem was identified in all three grades (tenth, eleventh, and twelfth). The actual classes for optional courses accounted for less than 20 percent of total class hours per week.

Fourth, some high schools suspended all classes before the HSPT tests and transformed the schools into cram centers so that students could concentrate on preparing for the tests.

Fifth, classes dragged out longer. Additional classes were introduced after school and students needed to prepare the tests in the evening and on holidays. Some high schools induced students to join specific cramming schools for the HSPT tests (ibid.)”

In this document, the Zhejiang Education Bureau clearly formulated the punishments. The departments that were responsible for supervision were held accountable for the ignorant and arbitrary abuse of discretion. The high schools were required to rectify the errors as soon as possible. If the high schools ignored the warnings and repeatedly made the same mistakes, both high schools administrations and their principals were held accountable. If the high schools were provincial level model schools, they risked being demoted or deprived of the title. Good implementation performance was designated as the key performance target for cadres in the education system. The evaluation of the implementation followed the “one-vote veto” (一票否决) principle (ibid.) (i.e., despite a cadre’s excellent work in other areas, as long as the

implementation for the *gaokao* reform failed to fulfill given targets, he or she would not be evaluated as a good cadre).

Several months after this document was released, thepaper.cn (澎湃新闻)<sup>46</sup> contributed a series of comprehensive reports on the implementation in five cities in Zhejiang Province in March 2017. The reports displayed four problems from a distinctive perspective by revealing how and why the students, teachers, and school principals made such decisions and what were the ensuing consequences of their behavior. Interestingly enough, none of these problems were mentioned in the warning letter issued by the Zhejiang Education Bureau, although they also impeded the good implementation of *gaokao* reform:

1) although changing rules of *gaokao* offered students more opportunities and freedom in the selection of test subjects, high schools were not always able to coordinate the resources to fulfill every individual selection of the students. As a result, schools and students both made compromises (Pengpai 2017b). The original intent was to explore students' personal interests and inspire interdisciplinary learning, however, due to limited resources and practical infeasibilities, the schools had no other choice but to influence students' selection.

2) with changing rules of *gaokao*, the preparation time for *gaokao* tests was extended. Before the reform, students sat for the tests in the last year of high school, and in the tenth and eleventh grade, the curriculum and teaching plans focused on knowledge transfer rather than test preparation. Nevertheless, once the HSPT rules were introduced, the students could choose to take selected tests in the tenth and eleventh grades. The three years of secondary education were literally transformed into cram camp for the *gaokao* tests (Pengpai 2017a).

3) since the total score of *gaokao* would be calculated differently, the high schools, teachers, students, and parents soon formed strong allies and acted in speculative ways. All of them share the same goal: to maximize the total score. Many students choose those subjects that are not so popular, so that they compete with fewer cohorts. High schools also collected

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<sup>46</sup> Thepaper.cn (澎湃新闻) was established in July 2014 in the wake of new media development and it belongs to the Shanghai United Media Group (上海报业集团). The launch of the paper.cn was initiated and supported by the CCP Party Committee of Shanghai. In response to the development of new media and social media, thepaper.cn can be viewed as a reconstructed form of mouthpiece of the party-state to counterbalance the growing market share of the independent media platforms.

information from various sources and tried to figure out the best solution for individual students (ibid.).

4) many high schools were short of teachers for the subject “Information Technology.” Previous to the reform, Information Technology was treated as an optional course to widen students’ common knowledge and enhance the technical understanding of the information age. Once the subject could be selected as a test subject, the curriculum and teaching strategies totally shifted. Although the fundamental change was to add classes per week, the high schools did not have enough time to hire new teachers. In particular, there were not many teachers for Information Technology on the market, so the Zhejiang Education Bureau and other education institutions were forced to train more teachers (Pengpai 2017c).

In fact, the four problems above also worked against the central policy intent, but they were not explicitly denounced in the official warning from the Zhejiang Education Bureau. By comparing the aforementioned implementation deficits from two sides, it is plausible to say that the discretionary space of the high schools was strictly controlled by the education authorities. Basically, two types of the implementation problems could be tolerated. First, problems that originated from financial difficulties and resource scarcity could still be endured by the education authorities because they could not afford the immediate financial transfers to the high schools. With some patience, the schools could find their own solutions to solve these technical problems. Second, problems that originated with the students were the most affected group of policy innovation. The changing behavior of the students was expected and also desirable for policy makers. The authorities could not forbid any speculative decision-making by students.

## **5.7 Adjustments of the implementation plans**

The class of 2014 was the first cohort to experience the *gaokao* tests and admission under the new conditions in June 2017. The assessment for the first period of experimentation was completed. After the enrollment process was completed, the Zhejiang Education Bureau issued a governmental document aiming to improve the implementation: “Notification on the Optimization of High School Proficiency Tests and the Qualification Tests of Selected Subjects” (浙江省教育厅关于完善学考选考工作的通知) (Zhejiaokao 2017: No. 116). The key of the document was to abolish two operational settings in the implementation plan and replace them with new solutions. As illustrated before, in order to introduce the HSPT tests,

the Zhejiang Education Bureau arranged the test appointments for the school-leaving certification and the *gaokao* qualification simultaneously, and those who had to take the qualification test needed to complete additional questions in the test paper. This arrangement seemed to be an efficient solution to the reform changes. Nevertheless, after three years of experimentation, it was abolished. The class of 2017 would be the first cohort to sit for the tests for school-leaving certification and the *gaokao* qualification separately (ibid.). Another adjustment in the document was a re-scheduling of the test appointments. As in Shanghai, Zhejiang Education Bureau decided to arrange the tests in January and June, as well (ibid.).

The organizational adjustments represented two major differences of the implementation plans between Shanghai and Zhejiang. With the adjustments being completed in 2017, Shanghai and Zhejiang shared similar administrative procedures in the operational process of the HSPT tests. Nevertheless, Zhejiang's  $C_7^3$  plan remained. In comparison to Shanghai's  $C_6^3$  plan, Zhejiang Testing Authority had to deal with more complicated situations to organize the tests. As presented earlier in section 5.3.2, Zhejiang initially dealt with the centrally intended changes by minimizing the administrative efforts (i.e., within the extended bureaucratic structure, there has been a tacit consensus that the policy innovation could be realized through minimal institutional changes in the educational system). Nevertheless, Zhejiang's strategic approach was not recognized by the central level. In plain language, the center considered Zhejiang's implementation efforts as not elaborate enough. From this perspective, it is plausible to say that the function of having two experimentation sites was to compare the implementation behavior of two local states whose discretionary space could be monitored and controlled by the center. By comparing the different implementation actions, the center could evaluate and judge what kind of actions were to be discouraged or encouraged to improve the implementation quality as intended.

In April 2018—two months before the *gaokao* tests in June 2018—the Shanghai Municipal government announced the launch of a new mechanism that set a baseline of test-takers for each selected test subject so that the scores could be properly calculated (Hufufa 2018: No. 14). The Shanghai Education Committee defined the baseline according to the needs and aims of the universities that enrolled students from Shanghai, and the baseline mechanism would be first applied for the test subject of physics (ibid.). In 2018, the authorities defined a

baseline of 15,000 for physics (Xinhua 2018a). To better explain how the baseline was used in the calculation, the grading curve was displayed again in Graph 18 below. If more than 15,000 students from the class of 2018 selected the subject of physics for *gaokao*, the grade distribution would be calculated based on the actual number of test-takers. Once fewer than 15,000 students selected physics, the distribution of the scores (in proportional percentage) needed to be calculated according to the baseline of 15,000 (ibid.). Introducing the baseline was determined based on the admission statistics of the previous year, when the first cohort of students were tested and enrolled under the new admission rules. The decision of Shanghai was encouraged by the central level (ibid.), as it proved to be efficient and practical to set the baseline to deal with the unexpected number of test takers.

%	A: 15%		B: 30%			C: 30%			D: 20%		E: 5%
	5%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	10%	5%	
Level	A+	A	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	E
Score	70	67	64	61	58	55	52	49	46	43	40

Graph 18: The grading system in the implementation of admission policy innovation in Shanghai (by author)

## 5.8 The harsh punishment of misbehavior

On 5 December 2018, four top-level cadres from Zhejiang Education Bureau were fired:

- Guo Huawei—the director and the secretary of party committee of the Zhejiang Education Bureau—was asked to resign;
- Wang Yuqing—secretary of the party committee of the Zhejiang Test Authority—was fired and put under investigation;
- Chen Yujun—the disciplinary head of the Zhejiang Test Authority was sacked and sent to the provincial party disciplinary committee for further investigation;
- Sun Heng—the member of party committee of the Zhejiang Test Authority and the member of the party committee of the Zhejiang Education Bureau—was summoned to an admonitory talk with provincial party discipline supervisors (Xinhua 2018c).

At the press conference, the vice-director of the Education Bureau made a deep bow to the journalists and apologized to the public for the “serious mistakes” made (ZJEB 2018).

The political incident was to be traced back to 24 November 2018 when the English test results were released. Many students and parents began to question the test scores. They

complained of the unfairness and suspected manipulation of the test grades. In response to the public doubts, the Zhejiang Test Authority immediately released a statement which only fueled public anger. The authority explained that after the test many students and parents issued petitions and complained that the test questions were too difficult. While the tests were graded, the teachers found that many questions for reading comprehension and writing skills were significantly harder than those from the previous year. Therefore, the authority decided to grade the test on a curve. As a result, students received higher scores than usual, although the test questions themselves were harder. The curved scores ironically benefitted those students who did not perform particularly well. With points for difficult questions being curved, those who were not able to give proper answers obtained extra points, but those who already answered questions perfectly did not get any points (He 2018).

The public outcry caught serious attention from the top leadership of the provincial government. On 1 December, the provincial governor launched an investigation and after four days of investigation, the inquiry team came to the conclusion that the scandal was entirely the result of wrong decision-making. The Zhejiang Education Bureau and the Test Authority announced the investigation results at the press conference. The original tests results needed to be reinstated and the responsible cadres were fired (ZJFB 2018).

The investigation report revealed that the leading cadres of the Zhejiang Test Authority determined to curve the test points despite the fact that the majority at the meeting opposed it. They blindly accepted the suggestions from the upper level (i.e., the Zhejiang Education Bureau) without sufficient examination of the problem. Furthermore, in the central policy and the local implementation plans, the grading method for Chinese, mathematics and English was clearly defined. Students obtained the numeric scores and the absolute values would not be curved. The decision-making was blind, irresponsible, and disappointing (ibid.).

## **5.9 Summary**

This chapter began with an illustration of the implementing actor roles and the institutional environment in which they were situated. It identified the power relations among the actors by specifying their responsibilities and inter-organizational dependence. As the actual implementation occurred in high schools and universities, the observational evidence emphasized the distinctive behavior of the implementers and affected interest groups that were

shaped by the institutional constraints, the steering instruments, and the organizational resources.

The inquiry identified and conceptualized the behavioral patterns of the local implementers as “tactical policy implementation,” which defined the outcome of the causal process “from policy intent to actions.” Tactics differ from strategies in the sense that the implementers played either defensively or passively in the implementation process. Strategies were ideas and solutions that actors themselves proactively constructed and designed. In the empirical analyses above, I identified constraints in decision-making and problem-solving among the high schools, universities, and students. To a great extent, the local implementation plans were made in compliance with the goals stated in the central policy innovation. The implementation plans had to be approved by the vice-premier before the official announcement. Furthermore, the actors made tactical calculations by balancing the interests of different groups and exhausting the limited resources they possessed. The discretionary space at the local was not only narrowed by available resources but was also compressed by various measures taken by the central government (institutional constraints and steering instruments).

First, the MOE imposed time constraints on the local government. In the central matching policies, the center set a clear deadline for the localities to provide concrete action plans and guidance to accomplish policy changes. The hierarchical structure of the educational bureaucracy enabled the higher level to take administrative measures to control the schedule of implementation. With design and local implementation guidance, the local governments were constrained by a rigid timetable to make decisions and the most secured way was to choose alternative measures that were in conformity with central goals.

Second, the central control of the implementation was strengthened by the midterm evaluation that led to immediate implementation adjustments in high schools. Additional regulations were formulated by the provincial government to eliminate misconduct of front-line implementers in high schools. From this perspective, the provincial bureaucrats joined the central level to monitor the on-the-ground implementation by constraining behavior through direct political intervention in the process.

Third, as explained in Chapter 3, the admission policy belonged to a distinctive type of policy that reflected a wider social impact if changes needed to be made in the existing

institutional base. Greater public attention in the implementation process intensified the steering effects on the implementers. The high schools needed to negotiate strategically in advance with the parents and students in order to acquire the acceptance of the new plans. Schools aimed to form a solid alliance with the students and parents. However, as illustrated in the triangular relationship (local education authority—high schools—students and parents), there was an official feedback loop between the students (or the general public) to the educational authority—letters and visits (信访). When public petitions arrived at the local bureaucracy, action was immediately taken to punish the responsible cadres; it was strong psychological pressure imposed on the local level. It confirmed the assumption that the “content factors” and the “context factors” interacted with one another and jointly generated the causal forces that modified the discretionary space and shaped the behavioral patterns in implementation.

Fourth, the available resources not only defined the flexibility and feasibility of the implementation on-site, but also determined how the intended implementers came up with coping tactics to fulfill the tasks with limited resources. The basic observation was that each organizational unit—be it a high school or university—followed the principle of “mutually exclusive, collectively exhausted” to distribute and use resources. The beginning of this chapter explained the classification of high schools and universities, with the key-point schools and the leading universities receiving the most resources from the state. Therefore, in different schools and universities, front-line staff and teachers offered different solutions for students, but the fundamental logic remained the same: making full use of available resources.

As summarized, the process from “policy content to actions” was explained by a causal mechanism of modification and compression in discretionary space that produced the outcome of tactical implementation at the local level. The authoritative decision-making of the central government and its monopoly power to judge local implementation imposed enormous pressure on the implementers at all levels. Political steering through various feedback loops established official supervisory channels and devised punishment measures in response to abusive behavior. Therefore, the discretionary power descended progressively from the central to the local level.



## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 The importance of the study: Causal mechanism and outcome

“Implementation is a moving target, and the vocabulary of creation and completion becomes less appropriate than the language of evolution” (Pressman 1979:176). The investigation of policy implementation embeds a fundamental difficulty in defining the outcome because an evolutionary process is always in motion and the outcome is always moving ahead. When policy changes elicit institutional adjustments and shift power relations, sequential conflicts and obstacles evolve leading to amendments in policy programs, which constantly influence the output of implementation. The present research tackles this challenge by focusing on the process “from policy intent to actions” that treat patterns of implementation behavior as the dependent variable (outcome). The approach avoids arbitrary and ambiguous definitions of implementation results and clarifies the unit of observation. The process “from policy intent to actions” represents an evolution of *how* a policy was formed and translated into actual policy content and *how* the content is transformed through implementing activities. This research explains the causation between the policy’s intent and implementing behavior and identifies the pattern of implementation behavior of the admission policy innovation in China.

The analysis of previous chapters suggests that local behavior for admission policy innovation in China can be conceptualized as a “tactical policy implementation,” which was a result of the causal process of modification and compression in the discretionary space at the local level. Tactics differ from strategies in the sense that the implementing actors play defensively and passively in the process. The interplay and mutual reinforcement of the content and context factors of the policy generated the causal forces that constrained the discretionary space for local actors. The content factors are the type of policy, envisioned changes, affected interest groups, and the intended implementers. The context factors compose of institutional constraints, steering instruments, and resources.

The hypothesized causal mechanism was tested in the two implementation cases in Shanghai and Zhejiang. Local actor behavior in these two venues differed although, in some details, tactical policy implementation is identified in both cases. Different from strategies, which require proactive engagement and initiative decision-making, tactics contain a set of calculations by actors who are constrained and compressed in limited discretion space and can

only passively react to decisions from other actors. The hypothesized causal mechanism and the outcome are present in both cases and therefore validate the assumption that tactical implementation of the local level was caused by the modification and compression of the discretion space through higher level interventions. The discretion power of the local implementers could be curtailed at any given time, if the higher level believed that the implementation went wrong.

## **6.2 Synthesis of findings**

The thesis deals with the policy innovation of China's higher education admission system beginning with three questions:

- *Why* did the Chinese government engage with policy innovation in the 2014 admission system?
- *How* was it produced?
- *How* were local implementation activities shaped?

The following parts merge the key findings of the research.

### **6.2.1 The Usefulness of policy innovation as a concept and top-level designed policy innovation in China**

The study conceptualizes policy innovation and explains its interpretations in the Chinese reform context. Policy innovation is understood as the development of new ideas or concepts and the conversion of these ideas into new policies or policy instruments (Göbel and Heberer 2017: 286). It is further characterized by the key features of novelty, innovation trigger, and social impact. In the concluding part, this author evaluates policy innovation as a useful and practical tool to analyze the policy making process according to the three features of innovation, however, this conceptual device is less useful for the implementation analyses, because implementation study concerns about why an innovation policy is realized by certain actors in this way. The conceptual boundaries for newness and innovation trigger became obsolete when it came to the analyses of local implementation process. As argued previously, a set of factors simultaneously impact the implementation process and the joint force influences the size of discretion space and leads to dynamic implementation behaviors.

In China's politics, there emerges a paradox between central haunting and local reluctance to policy innovation. The growing pressures and psychological fear imposed on the localities have led to a sharp decrease of local innovations, while the unpleasant implementation activities at the local level have disappointed the central government and caused the power recentralization by establishing the CLGDR as the central decision body within the CCP party line. To counterbalance the unwavering attitude to local innovation and improve the quality of implementation, the central government called for a top-level policy innovation design, which streamlined the policymaking at the top. The top-level designed policy innovation is defined as "comprehensive reform guidance and reform plans which are produced, approved and enacted by the central government (Zhang 2017)."

The policy innovation for the test and admission system was triggered by the pressing problem of a talent shortage and mismatch of human capital in China. The central government perceived it as a crisis on the labor market which would impede the economic development and lead to social instability. Therefore, the admission policy innovation aimed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the talent selection which can produce sufficient and qualified manpower for the labor needs.

### **6.2.2 Type of policy: Sensibility and complexity of admission policy in China**

Admission policies aim to establish selection rules for the distribution of university slots. Different from other public policies (e.g., healthcare or housing), the allocation of higher education opportunities exerts a much wider social and political impact on society. Access to university is an intangible asset that influences one's career chances on the labor market and on upward mobility. The link between talent selection and the labor force creates distinctive policy considerations for the decision makers in China.

One might argue that the wrench between meritocratic and egalitarian principles accounts for goal conflicts and periodic swings in policymaking for China's test and admission system. Chapter 3 reviews how historically the meritocratic and egalitarian values were interpreted and applied in the selection criteria. In mainland China, the selection principles were altered time and again due to dynamic changes in both social and political life. While the egalitarian ideal remained the highest priority in admitting students during the Cultural Revolution, the *gaokao* revival in 1977 witnessed an ideological twist that turned the system

back towards a meritocratic track. The efficiency and effectiveness of a functional university admission system is regarded as the key to economic success. In order to improve the quality of the labor market, the admission criteria were to be adjusted based on meritocratic values. However, as the leading party in China—the CCP—still needed (and needs) to uphold a socialist ideology, the selection followed egalitarian principles and restrained the further creation of education elites. The decision makers needed to design a system that could balance the contradiction. More importantly, the “stability first” principle in place since the 1989 student movement added more sensibility to university admission policymaking as social stability in China was (and is) closely related to the regime’s legitimacy based on CCP ideology and economic growth. These two pillars of legitimacy were represented with contradictory policy goals within the admission system.

Inherited from the traditional system, the state applied policy instruments such as “admission quotas” to balance the contradictions in selection values. The central level controlled the distribution of regional quotas and treated each province as one unit. The quota calculation was controlled by the central powers (i.e., the MOE and the NDRC), but the decision-making was not transparent. Based on the regional distribution of the universities and quota statistics, it is plausible to say that the provincial quota was proportionally correlated with the number of universities per province/region (see 3.2.1, Graph 4).

Moreover, the admission stratification in China caused growing social discontent that made admission policymaking evermore complex. The rural-urban divide and regional disparity were the core reasons of unequal distribution of higher education opportunities. Rural and poor areas could neither provide qualified basic education nor confront enormous difficulties in preparing students for the *gaokao* selection. The institutional setting of *hukou*- and *xueji*-registration system generated additional obstacles for migrant children whose permanent residences were in provinces other than their hometown. Many studies indicated that family background, such as parents’ income and social status, became increasingly important in deciding one’s college/university access. The way toward education elites seemed to be narrowed due to a set of problems and the composition of the university students changed structurally, with students’ social and cultural capital playing a more significant role in

education attainment. All these facts increased the complexity in admission policymaking and implementation.

As presented above, admission policy is a sensitive and complex issue in China. The more sensitive the policy issue is, the smaller the discretionary space is. The more complex the interest networks are, the smaller the discretionary space is.

### **6.2.3 From policy intent to content: Drawing the boundaries of discretion space**

Admission policy innovations endured for approximately ten years (2005-14). The trigger of these innovations can be traced back to the great debate over *suzhi* education in 2005. Since that time, the policy intent for *gaokao* reform has remained persistent—nurturing creative talent for economic transition. The admission policymaking has witnessed three critical junctures: the failed reform attempt in 2008, the failed policy proposal in 2011, and the CCP deliberation and Liu Yandong’s visit in Shanghai in 2014.

Although MOE’s reform attempt in 2008 failed, it has clarified and translated the policy intent into policy goals that established the foundation of policy content (alternative changes) for innovation in 2014. The failure of the 2011 policy proposal revealed the sensitivity and complexity of admission policy in the Chinese context and uncovered the contradictory opinions among decision makers. As a result, the second failure led to the institutional building at the central level (e.g., establishment of the Advisory Commission) and revealed the central intention to clarify the complexity of interest networks in society and to tackle conflicts through top-level designed policies. The third critical juncture was Liu Yandong’s visit in Shanghai in August 2014, when Shanghai and Zhejiang educational bureaucrats reported the preliminary plans for the experimentation. The event not only revealed the overlap of policymaking and implementation, but also uncovered the central control in local implementation.

Four features are identified in the policymaking processes: (1) the persistence of central policy intent; (2) the overlapping processes of policymaking and policy implementation; (3) experts as intermediaries; and (4) the black box of final decision-making. The persistence of central intent not only guides the goal setting of policymaking over time, but also controls the local interpretations of the intended policy changes. The overlapping of policymaking and implementation enabled central intervention in the local implementation process by steering

and controlling the design. Expert-created information flows benefitted the central decision-making by transmitting local attitudes to the decision makers. Nevertheless, policy experts had only limited influence on the final policy decisions—all of which were made in a small circle of top leaders and remained non-transparent to the implementers and affected groups. All these features represent the central aim to draw clear boundaries of the local discretion space through the control over policy content.

The analysis has shown four alternative changes in the policy innovation: (1) introducing the HSPT into the *gaokao* grading system, (2) abolishing the disciplinary dichotomy and ensuring students' individual selection of secondary test subjects, (3) offering two chances for the English tests, and (4) introducing the AMSCA mechanism. The changes are illustrated in relation to the content factors of envisioned changes, affected interest groups, and intended implementers. As hypothesized, *the degree of the policy changes is positively correlated with the discretionary space at the local level*. In the course of policy formulation, experts suggested a set of changes for the *gaokao* admission system (e.g., the abolishment of English test and creating an independent enrollment authority for universities). Yet, these suggestions were rejected due to internal disagreements and central concern about socio-political instability. The control over policy changes actually defined the degree of changes in policy innovation that exerted a direct impact on local discretion. Reducing the degree of changes revealed the central fear of local abuse of discretionary power. Therefore, the four alternative changes that survived in the final policy document demonstrated the central design of *who* and *to what extent* one could experiment with *which* changes.

#### **6.2.4 Tactical implementation behavior in Shanghai and Zhejiang**

The empirical investigation of Shanghai and Zhejiang provided detailed measures taken by local bureaucrats, high schools, and front-line teachers. Their tactics are constructed and shaped by both content- and context-related measures (see details in Table 8), which modified and compressed the discretionary space for implementation. It is also argued that the discretionary power decreases from the central to local levels, with actual on-site implementers possessing only the smallest power to realize change.

The implementers of admission policy innovation are situated in different positions in the testing and admission authority, representing a disjointed bureaucracy within the *tiao-kuai* fragmentation. The power distribution between the functional bureaucracy and the territorial governments created institutional constraints for local education bureaucrats, who balance the instructions from the MOE and the provincial level government. The most controversial problem of the university admission system lies in the classification of high schools and universities that are sponsored by the state. This institutionalized classification is bound to the bureaucratic affiliation of each university. The higher the bureaucratic affiliation is, the more resources a university can obtain. The classification leads to the formation of leading universities that are not evenly distributed cross-regionally, with most concentrated in large cities such as Shanghai and Beijing (see also Chapter 5.1.5, Table 5). In relation to the quota system, it is fair to say that more admission quotas for leading universities are distributed to

	Policy content-related measures	Policy context-related measures
<b>Central level</b>	<p>Concretizing the policy goals;</p> <p>Task distribution and binding responsibilities to designated bureaucratic units;</p> <p>Setting deadlines and imposing time pressure on implementation procedures</p>	<p>Interwoven processes of policymaking and implementation (central intervention in local implementation planning);</p> <p>Midterm evaluation and feedback loops through inspection teams;</p> <p>Political intervention for implementation adjustments</p>
<b>Provincial Level</b>	<p>Provincial compliance to central goals;</p> <p>Internal circulation of potential policy changes</p>	<p>Triangle relationship between high schools, parents and students and provincial government;</p> <p>Punishment of misconducts</p>
<b>Site of implementation</b>	<p>Mobilization and explanation of policy changes to the involved interest groups (parents and students)</p>	<p>High schools and students forming an alliance;</p> <p>Exhausting the available resources to fulfill the reform tasks</p>

Table 8: Content- and context-related measures for the control of discretion space of local implementation (by author)

resource-abundant regions.

The experimentations in Shanghai and Zhejiang started well before the official launch of the policy innovation in September 2014. Nevertheless, the detailed plans for the

implementation of HSPT and AMSCA were completed after the matching policy had been issued by the MOE. The local interpretations of the policy innovation and the central matching policies demonstrated, to a large extent, conformity with the central goals. In the central matching policies, the MOE had clearly set the deadlines for provincial education bureaus to submit the local plans for the implementation. It not only imposed time pressure on local decision makers, but also contained local misinterpretations of central intention.

Shanghai's plan mostly represented the central policy instructions by applying the 3+C<sub>6</sub><sup>3</sup> model and following the central guidance of setting grading system. The discretion space of the local level remained quite limited. Even within the compressed space of discretion power, the then director of the Shanghai Education Committee played a dominant role in adjusting the schedule for English examination in Shanghai so that the student body could have sufficient preparation time. His attempt was successful due to his paramount leadership in the local education *xitong*. Although the re-scheduling of test appointments would cause additional work for the test authority in Shanghai, the bureaucrats were willing to compromise and to prioritize the interests of students and teachers.

Similar to Shanghai, Zhejiang was obedient to the central policy innovation and MOE's matching policy. Unlike Shanghai, Zhejiang was able to adjust the 3+3 model to the 3+C<sub>7</sub><sup>3</sup> model to include "information technology" into its selective test subjects as this subject test had been part of the *gaokao* tests in Zhejiang for years. However, the Zhejiang Education Bureau tried to minimize the administrative efforts in the experimentation process by scheduling the test appointment for school-leaving tests and qualification tests on the same day, with students sitting the qualification tests spending another 30 minutes to finish extra questions. Zhejiang's discretionary power is further constrained due to its dependence on central proposition of test papers. In this perspective, Shanghai, with its independent authority of test proposition, had more flexibility and agility in the experimentation. However, both places apply the tactics that best suited the local needs and conditions, and this tactical implementation was deliberately designed within the boundaries of its discretionary space.

Except the implementer in the local education bureaucracies, the front-line implementers in the high schools and the affected groups (students and parents) also acted tactically in response to policy changes. The high schools, local education authority, and

students / parents formed a triangular relationship to realize information exchange and communication. To make organizational change feasible, high schools in Shanghai and Zhejiang applied similar tactics to mobilize the parents and students at an early stage in order to reach a general acceptance of the affected interest groups. In order to fulfill the different needs of the students, the high schools made full use of the available resources to match the organizational adjustments in teaching plans and additional staffing. Already at the beginning of the experimentation, high schools in Shanghai and Zhejiang became pioneers (or models) for the *gaokao* reform. Teachers and education bureaucrats from other provinces were dispatched there to learn from their example. The training in Shanghai and Zhejiang was organized by a private startup and it was covered by the provincial budgets.

The midterm evaluation in December 2015 revealed a central steering instrument in the local experimentation. After a series of negative consequences of the experimentation was reported, the Zhejiang Education Bureau soon demonstrated its compliance to the central government and criticized the abusive actions taken by the front-line implementers requiring immediate corrections. An incident in November 2018 demonstrated the sensibility of the *gaokao* issue in society. The “letters and visits” of the parents caused serious public doubt about the grading system that was arbitrarily manipulated with the endorsement of a few top leaders in the Zhejiang Education Bureau. Only an immediate punishment of the relevant officials and the rectification of the test scores helped to ease the public anger about the misbehavior of the education bureaucrats. Direct interventions of punishing and correcting misconduct largely reduced the discretionary power of the local bureaucracies and the front-line implementers. As argued earlier, it was always the higher-level authorities that were able to decide what was considered “innovative” and what was “abusive.” Therefore, the fear of making a mistake partly explains the tactical implementation behavior at the local level.

In summary, the institutional constraints, the steering instruments, and the set of measures taken by the implementers jointly produced a compressed discretionary space for the local implementation of the admission policy innovation. The discretionary power descends progressively from the central to the local level.

### **6.3 Theoretical and policy implications**

This thesis fills a research gap in the study of university admission policy implementation. Public policy implementation in China mainly focused on environmental protection, housing, and the healthcare system. As mentioned in Chapter 2, for a single policy study, the type of policy (the policy field) cannot be underestimated in evaluating the policy implementation. Chinese scholars treated educational policies differently from other public policies. The university facilities for public administration did not include education policy analyses in their research scope and regarded it as a job for the faculty of education research to explore (Interview 31). The present study developed an analytical framework based on implementation theories and organizational theories, viewing admission policies as part of public policy, distributing public resources (university slots) among the general population.

From a theoretical perspective, little attention was given to linking characteristics of policies to their subsequent implementation, to relating implementation problems to characteristics of the political regimes in which they were pursued, or to exploring the general nature of implementation in the Third World (Grindle 1980:5). The current study was enlightened by Grindle's approach and began "from policy intent to actions" as it was commonly framed. It provided a new perspective to look at policy implementation by focusing on organizational behavior of different actors in the process. The study suggested that the identification of behavioral patterns and their corresponding logic was more important than evaluating the successful implementation output given that policy implementation resembled an evolutionary process that never ends. The behavioral logics determined the direction of the implementation development and enabled a more solid base to characterize the implementation process.

In the broad discussion over admission policies in China, unequal distribution of higher education opportunities remains the major concern of decision makers and policy researchers. The quotas and the affirmative actions are the main policy instruments applied by the state to counterbalance the regional inequality in the admissions. The thesis demonstrated that admission stratification lies in the rural-urban divide as well as uneven regional development that cause large gaps in basic education quality across regions. Admission rules alone can hardly improve the equality in university admissions if the quality of basic education cannot be

increased in rural and poor provinces. Although affirmative action encouraged leading universities to enroll more rural students, it does not change the fact that these students needed to put much more effort into their university studies. Fairness of competitive tests and equality of higher education opportunities are two different problems in terms of admission policymaking. The *gaokao* system is believed to be fairest way in evaluating a student's scholastic aptitude and it is widely legitimized in Chinese society. However, the admission results always indicated an ever-decreasing representation of rural students at universities. Obviously, it is a misconception that the rules of the *gaokao* selection cause unequal university admissions. Instead, it is a problem that needs to be tackled by systematic changes in the overall educational system in China.

In a much broader context, university admission is a sensitive issue in almost every society that applies competitive selection systems to the enrollment of students. In the age of transnational education, the classification of universities has already become a global problem. *The Times Higher Education (THE) World University Ranking* and the *QS World University Ranking* have institutionalized the quantitative evaluation of universities' competitiveness on an international scale. The formation of leading universities has gone beyond national boundaries; the admission system increasingly relies on global governance rather than domestic decision-making. Equal access to higher education needs to be re-defined according to entirely different criteria in the global context.

#### **6.4 Methodological contribution to political science: Why process tracing?**

The thesis presents how the process-tracing method can be operationalized in small-n case studies. It proves to be a powerful tool to test the causal mechanism for an outcome. The method allows an investigation of the unfolding trajectories of changes taking place in select cases by opening the black box between cause and effect (Beach and Pedersen Rasmus Brun 2013: 34). By defining the "process" under investigation, the research scope can be clarified. In order to solve the classical problem of a "moving target" in policy implementation, the present study treats the process "from policy intent to actions" as the unit of investigation.

Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates how to calculate the number of cases. For one hypothesized causal mechanism (CM → outcome), one needs at least two cases to make general causal claims (as shown in Chapter 1.2.3). If one has more than one hypothesized causal

mechanism, one can still apply the same method (i.e., a probability calculation) to determine the number of cases.

Moreover, the process-tracing method is useful for the specification of variables and theory-based hypotheses. To test the hypothesized causal mechanisms, researchers are guided to present the qualitative observations in a logical structure in order to make causal inferences. The so-called “smoking gun test” is conducted based on causal inferences. If the presence of the hypothesized causal mechanisms and the outcome can be proved in the selected cases, one can then validate the assumptions and draw a causal claim for the defined “process”.

## Appendix: List of interviews

No.	Gender	Date	Position   Affiliation of Interviewees	Location
1.	m	1 April, 2014	Co-Director of a Confucian Institute in Germany	In his office, Germany
2.	f	10 October, 2014	Retired senior fellow of the Development Research Center (DRC) of the State Council	Conference venue, in Lisbon, Portugal
3.	m	18 December, 2014	Professor of public administration and political sciences	In his office, in Shanghai
4.	f	26 December, 2014	Senior research fellow at the Central Translation and Compilation Bureau	In her office, in Beijing
5.	f	26 December, 2014	Editing director of a Chinese Radio Broadcaster	In her office, in Beijing
6.	m	27 December, 2014	Professor of public administration at a central university in Beijing	In his office
7.	m	29 December, 2014	Professor of sociology at a central university in Beijing	In his office
8.	m	31 December, 2014	Professor of education department of a university in Beijing	In his office
9.	m	6 January, 2015	Vice President a university in Hong Kong	In his office, in Hong Kong
10.	m	7 January, 2015	Professor of a university in Hong Kong	In his office, Hong Kong

<b>11.</b>	m	20 January, 2015	Former staff at the admission office of a university in Nanjing	In his office, Nanjing
<b>12.</b>	m	22 January, 2015	Research fellow of Linguistic Department at a University in Shanghai	In his office, Shanghai
<b>13.</b>	m	28 January, 2015	Director of Human Resources Department of Joint Venture in Shanghai	In a meeting room of the company, Shanghai
<b>14.</b>	m	25 May, 2015	Vice President of a university in Shanghai	In a meeting room, Berlin
<b>15.</b>	m	25 May, 2015	Visiting scholar of Mecator Institute for China Studies (MERICS)	Meeting room at the MERICS research center
<b>16.</b>	m	3 June, 2015	Professor from a central university in Beijing	At a conference venue in Duisburg, Germany
<b>17.</b>	m	30 June, 2015	Sociology professor from a central university in Beijing	Hotel lobby
<b>18.</b>	m	7 September, 2015	Sociology professor from a university in Shanghai	In his office
<b>19.</b>	m	7 September, 2015	Doctoral student from a university in Shanghai	Campus coffee shop
<b>20.</b>	f	9 September, 2015	Student (freshman) from a university in Shanghai	Telephone interview
<b>21.</b>	f	10 September, 2015	Student (freshman) from a university in Shanghai	Telephone interview
<b>22.</b>	m	17 September, 2015	An official from the MOE and a Sociology Professor from a central university in Beijing	In a meeting room, Beijing

<b>23.</b>	m	22 September, 2015	Professor from a central university in Beijing	In his office, Beijing
<b>24.</b>	m	23 September, 2015	Professor from a central university in Beijing	Campus coffee shop, Beijing
<b>25.</b>	m	25 September, 2015	Professor from the Faculty of Education at a central university in Beijing	In his office, Beijing
<b>26.</b>	m	25 September, 2015	Research fellow at the National Education Research Center of the MOE	In his office, Beijing
<b>27.</b>	m	25 September, 2015	Professor from the Faculty of Education at a university in Beijing	In his office, Beijing
<b>28.</b>	m	30 September, 2015	Vice President of a university in Shanghai	In his office, Shanghai
<b>29.</b>	f	14 October, 2015	Director of admission office of a university in Shanghai	In her office, Shanghai
<b>30.</b>	m	14 October, 2015	Professor from the Faculty of Education at a university in Shanghai	In his office, Shanghai
<b>31.</b>	m	20 October, 2015	Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs at a university in Zhejiang	In his office, Hangzhou
<b>32.</b>	m	21 October, 2015	Official of Zhejiang Provincial Examination Department of Zhejiang Education Bureau	In his office, Hangzhou
<b>33.</b>	m	23 October, 2015	Professor from the Faculty of Education at a university in Shanghai	At a conference venue, in Ma'anshan

<b>34.</b>	m	24 October, 2015	Former president of a university in Shanghai	At a conference venue, in Ma'anshan
<b>35.</b>	m	29 October, 2015	German scholar	At the AHK Kammertreffen in Shanghai
<b>36.</b>	m	2 November, 2015	Professor at the Higher Education Research Center in Xiamen	In his office, in Xiamen
<b>37.</b>	f	16 November, 2015	Former director of a district level education bureau in Shanghai	In the classroom for cadre training, in Shanghai
<b>38.</b>	m	17 November, 2015	Former official of the Education Committee in Shanghai	In the classroom for cadre training, in Shanghai
<b>39.</b>	m	17 November, 2015	Director for Education Planning at a high school in Shanghai	In a meeting room at the high school
<b>40.</b>	m	18 November, 2015	Vice Principal of a high school in Shanghai	In a meeting room at the high school
<b>41.</b>	m	19 November, 2015	CEO of an education start-up company, specialized for training tours for education officials	In the shuttle bus
<b>42.</b>	m	19 November, 2015	Director of a high school in Yiwu, Zhejiang	In a meeting room, in Yiwu
<b>43.</b>	m	12 December, 2015	Officer of the admission office of a university in Chongqing	Interview questions answered via Email

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