

# Engineering Stability: Authoritarian Political Control over University Students in Post-Deng China

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## Abstract

Given their critical influence on society and politics, university students are one of the key target groups for authoritarian political control around the world. To further our understanding of the endurance and resilience of authoritarianism in post-Deng China, it is necessary to examine one of the Party-state's most crucial control frameworks: the institutional mechanism through which it preserves social stability in the nation's 2,358 university campuses, and maintains control over its more than 22 million college students. Drawing upon intensive field research conducted in 2011, this article attempts to map out the structures and measures deployed by the post-Deng regime to nurture political compliance and consolidate its domination of university campuses. By deciphering an essential component of the state's political control apparatus, this article aims to shed new light on the internal operations of the authoritarian system that is running China today.

**Keywords:** Chinese politics; authoritarian regime; student politics; political control; university politics; social movement

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From the lunch counter at Greensboro, North Carolina, to the June Fourth Movement on Tiananmen Square, students across time and space have demonstrated their might as a dynamic social group that repeatedly shapes important socio-political trajectories at crucial junctures in history. When student activism is on the rise, it threatens the hegemony of existing powers. When students become cynical towards the official ideology and the state's political manoeuvres, their lack of involvement in adult politics gives them "free rein ... to adhere to absolute principles."<sup>1</sup> University students are thus said to be the "repositories of the ideals of their nation,"<sup>2</sup> and college campuses are said to be "the central stage for the drama of democracy's ebb and flow."<sup>3</sup>

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1 Lipset 1972, 4.

2 Donahue 1971, 254.

3 Rhoads 1998, 2.

Over the past decade, a wave of democratization has relentlessly toppled dictators from Central Asia to the Middle East. However, university students in China – who were among the most sophisticated rebellious social groups during years of authoritarian rule, from the warlord era to the Communists – appear to be politically quiescent in the post-Deng era.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, no major anti-regime student movement has taken place since 1989. Where sporadic nationalist student demonstrations have occurred, their target has been the Communist regime’s mortal enemy: the Western “imperialist” powers.<sup>5</sup> This begs the question: how does the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) keep general stability on the nation’s 2,358 university campuses and maintain control over more than 22 million college students?<sup>6</sup>

Generating and enforcing compliance lies at the core of every authoritarian regime’s mandate. To further our understanding of the Chinese political system, it is necessary to look into one of its most essential control frameworks: the mechanism that engenders compliance from the country’s university student population. Drawing upon intensive field research conducted in 2011, this article attempts to map out the structures and measures that the post-Deng Chinese Party-state uses to nurture political compliance and consolidate domination over university campuses.<sup>7</sup> The article does not seek to offer a comprehensive, all-inclusive explanation for the “deactivation” of student activism in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Nor does the author profess to argue that these structures and “tactics” per se result in political conformity or compliance. Yet, by deciphering a crucial component of China’s political control apparatus, this article aims to shed new light on the internal operations of the authoritarian system that is running the PRC today, and perhaps open up interesting analytical lines of enquiry into the country’s dynamic state–student relationship.

## Domination and Control

Domination and control are central to the exercise of political power in modern institutional settings. Political authorities, and sovereign states in particular, rely

4 In the wake of the 1989 student movement, Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader of China throughout the 1980s, retired from his official position as chairman of the Central Military Committee in November 1989. However, his physical retreat from national politics was not complete until after his Southern Tour (and the subsequent 14th National Congress of the Communist Party) in 1992. For the sake of simplicity, in this article the term “post-Deng period” refers to the two decades (1992–2012) since Deng’s Southern Tour.

5 For example, see Gries 2004; Shirk 2007.

6 According to the Ministry of Education, China had 2,358 formal institutions of tertiary education in 2010, which enrolled 22,317,929 undergraduate students. See Xie 2011, 21, 23.

7 Fieldwork for this research was carried out at a leading provincial university located in central China, which enrolls about 19,000 undergraduate students on its three campuses. I conducted 22 intensive interviews with university administrators, faculty members, political cadres and undergraduate students, and undertook research into the university’s official archives. This research is supplemented by 11 in-depth interviews conducted with PRC students studying in Hong Kong who had completed at least one year of undergraduate study at a prestigious national university. Through personal networks, I also interviewed two principal CCP cadres in charge of university student management. In addition, a wide range of Chinese newspapers, journals, official documents and university publications were consulted.

more or less on their monopoly over the use of legal violence as either the ultimate deterrent or the last resort to establish and maintain control over their subjects.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Charles Tilly describes modern states as “coercion-wielding organizations.”<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek goes so far as to argue that today’s predominant model of politics “is ultimately a politics of fear” – a sentiment aroused in reaction to the “potential victimization or harassment” imposed by the authorities.<sup>10</sup> In particular regard to authoritarian politics, Milan W. Svobik suggests that “violence is an ever-present and ultimate arbiter of conflicts.”<sup>11</sup>

However, no authority, even the most absolutist, can rely solely on outright violence (or, to use the Gramscian term, “direct domination”) to secure everyday compliance from the populace. According to some, the use of direct violence takes up more resources and undermines the legitimacy of the commanding apparatus. Therefore, to instil obedience in the people they subjugate, political authorities need institutionalized means and “everyday practices”<sup>12</sup> that impose and maintain “an internal, articulated and detailed control.”<sup>13</sup> These practices are often exercised along two lines: ideological and organizational.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci contends that the ruling classes in Western industrialized nations use a system of “cultural hegemony” to internalize and impose their domination over the exploited social sectors. By manipulating the “culture” – the beliefs, values, symbols, meanings and mores of a plural society – and by imposing their own cultural norms as the society’s general worldview, the ruling classes effectively ensure “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the grateful masses.” In that case, the state coercive apparatus only needs to enforce discipline upon “those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively.”<sup>14</sup>

Louis Althusser argues that successful reproduction of the political, economic and social orders of nations requires the reproduction of the subjugated groups’ attitudes of “submission to the rules of the established order,” which should be “in the form and under the form of *ideological* subjection.”<sup>15</sup> Althusser thus differentiates between the “coercive state apparatus” and the “ideological state apparatus” (ISA), and suggests that no state power can sustain itself “without exercising its hegemony over and in” the ISA.<sup>16</sup> The educational institutions, as the most crucial component in the dominant ISA, ensure “subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its ‘practice’,” and by doing so, these institutions reproduce the domination and control imposed by the established

8 Weber 1994.

9 Tilly 1992, 1.

10 Žižek 2008a, 40.

11 Svobik 2012, 2.

12 de Certeau 1984.

13 Foucault 1977, 172.

14 Gramsci 1971, 12.

15 Althusser 2008, 6–7.

16 Ibid., 20–21.

order.<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton also suggests that “the most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power.” Ideologies (or “hegemonic discourses”) thus constitute an essential foundation for dominative power and authority.<sup>18</sup>

Control and domination can also be established and maintained through organizational means. In *Discipline & Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that, for modern totalizing authorities, compliance is generated through the use of disciplinary power, which internalizes the expected norms and behaviour through the enforcement of habits, rules and orders. Such enforcement commonly involves centralized surveillance via a panoptic structure. The success of such discipline “derives from the use of simple instruments, hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and their combination.”<sup>19</sup> This kind of authority is exercised, as Bryan S. Turner explains, through a continual “web of institutional regulation and the micro-disciplines of control.”<sup>20</sup> According to Turner, “populations become progressively subordinated to rational disciplines under a process of bureaucratisation and rationalisation.”<sup>21</sup> Domination and control have thus come to involve “a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy.”<sup>22</sup> Žižek calls this kind of institutionalized control “systematic violence.”<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, in modern polities, domination and control have become a complex business that combines the powers of coercion, signification and discipline. Authorities around the globe may increasingly need to deploy a full set of nuanced, normalized and internalized systems and tactics to secure their organizational and ideological grip over the subjects they rule.

Scholars who examine the history of student activism in China, from the Republican period through the Cultural Revolution and up to the Tiananmen Movement in 1989, have long emphasized the decisive influence of institutional configurations of authority in Chinese universities and the effect that these structures have on student rebellions.<sup>24</sup> Researchers who look into the ways that the PRC authorities of the past have controlled university students have also been interested in exploring the ways in which the regime combines ideological mobilization and disciplinary operations for maintaining their domination over student politics. For example, Ann Kent’s 1975–76 study of the Shanghai Teachers’ University analyses the Maoist regime’s unsuccessful attempts to use educational revolution, class labelling and open-door schooling to create a new institution

17 *Ibid.*, 7.

18 Eagleton 2007, xxii, 45.

19 Foucault 1977, 170.

20 Turner 2008, 94.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Foucault 1977, 170.

23 Žižek describes systematic violence as “violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.” See Žižek 2008a, 9.

24 For example, for the Republican period, see Wasserstrom 1991 and Wasserstrom and Liu 1989; for the Cultural Revolution, see Walder 2009; for the 1989 student movement in Tiananmen, see Guthrie 1995. Also see Calhoun 1994; Wasserstrom and Perry 1994; Zhao 2001.

that equated “red” with “expert.”<sup>25</sup> In her 1982 book, *Competitive Comrades*, Susan Shirk uses Chinese high schools between 1960 and 1966 as a microcosm of the larger society to examine the CCP’s political control mechanism under Maoist rule. Here, the revolutionary Party-state attempted a moral transformation of society by dispensing educational, occupational or political opportunities to those who exemplified those moral virtues preferred by the regime. Shirk terms this new control mechanism as “virtuocracy,” which differs substantially from the traditional “meritocracy” or “feodocracy.”<sup>26</sup> Joel Andreas’ study of operations by the workers’ propaganda team (*gong xuan dui* 工宣队) at Tsinghua University reveals that even amid the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the Party-state strove to maintain political control over universities via a model of university governance featuring mutual supervision and institutionalized factional “checks and balances.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, by surveying political courses taught in the PRC, Ruth Hayhoe finds that ideological indoctrination in the name of “moral education” (*deyu* 德育) has helped the Party-state to generate stability in higher education institutions and suppress political turbulence in the wake of the Tiananmen Movement, at least in the short term.<sup>28</sup> By evaluating survey data published by PRC researchers, Stanley Rosen examines the effect of the CCP’s post-Tiananmen political re-education operations and suggests that these campaigns have not been particularly successful in instilling regime-sponsored ideologies or values in the Chinese students.<sup>29</sup> In a comparative study of communist regime youth policies in China and Vietnam during the 1990s, David Marr and Stanley Rosen demonstrate how the two governments have used elaborate organizational structures and the systematic provision or denial of opportunities to “induce youths to align themselves with the regime.”<sup>30</sup>

Despite the keen insights offered by these ground-breaking works, their findings are limited, either by focusing on specific historical periods (noticeably the Cultural Revolution), or by stressing only one aspect of the Party-state’s control over university students. Until now, there has been no overarching empirical study of the student control apparatus in China’s universities or of the nature of this apparatus in terms of its power and domination. This article seeks to provide a preliminary answer to a series of outstanding questions. When compared to the Maoist past, what continuities or changes are there in the organizational settings and control mechanisms used in China’s university campuses today? Through what means does the Party-state reach out to students and engender compliance? In a time of increasing grassroots protest, how has the Party-state attempted to marginalize the university students politically?

This article examines the continuities and changes in the organizational structure of student control in the post-Deng era. It then goes on to explore the various

25 Kent 1981.

26 Shirk 1982.

27 Andreas 2006.

28 Hayhoe 1992; Hayhoe 1993.

29 Rosen 1993, 310–334.

30 Marr and Rosen 1998.

control measures deployed by the Party-state to keep a firm grip over students and maintain its domination over university politics. Last, it offers some reflections on the student–regime relationship in post-Deng China, and its possible imprint on the direction of China’s future political development.

### The Organizational Base

John Israel once opined that “[t]he Communists mastered techniques of internal social control.”<sup>31</sup> After its military victory in 1949, one of the most pressing priorities for the CCP was to establish and maintain effective control over university students as part of a takeover of China’s urban “superstructures.” Together with a major re-organization of institutions of higher learning across China, the CCP imposed a new system of control over university campuses through which the Party-state extended its reach into every classroom. Features of this new system included the Party’s political domination, the subordinated status of academic authority, the quasi-military organization of students, and a fundamentally reformed curriculum that emphasized ideological conformity, practical knowledge and the coordination of educational specialization with the nation’s long-term industrial and agricultural development plans.<sup>32</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, universities were completely engulfed by the juggernaut of the Great Helmsman’s never-ending revolutionary mass campaigns.

In the post-Mao era, the restored Party bureaucracy discredited mass movements and re-established institutionalized control over the universities. They imposed a three-pronged bureaucracy, comprising the Communist Party, the Communist Youth League and the student work system (*xuegong xitong* 学工系统).<sup>33</sup> These hierarchical systems facilitate both top-down supervision by the Party-state and bottom-up collaboration from loyal activists and the student body at large. Unlike the more decentralized academic authorities that exist in parallel, this triple bureaucracy is highly centralized and accountable only to the Party secretary of the university (rather than the university president). With regular Party cadres staffing the system (with the assistance of “student cadres” who are handpicked from among student activists), this internal structure extends beyond the university walls and is part of the larger control framework headed by the CCP’s central or provincial committee on higher education work (*gaojiao gongwei* 高教工委). **Figure 1** demonstrates the organizational structure of student control in a typical Chinese university.

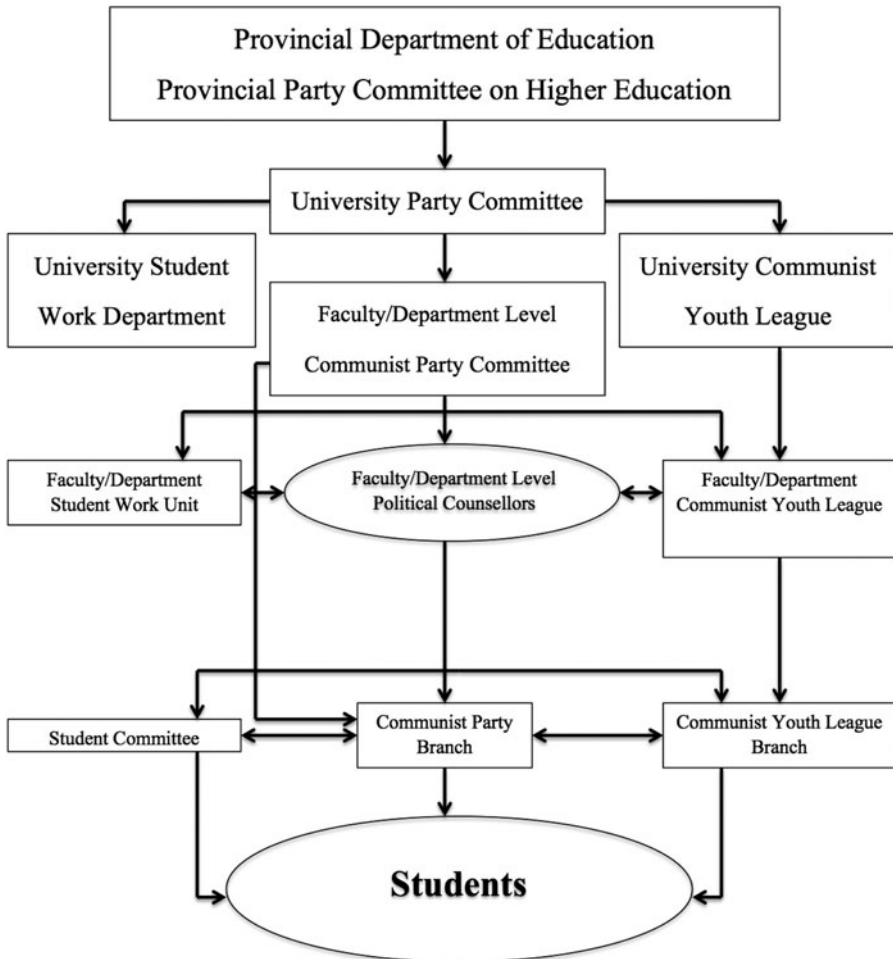
The student control bureaucracy emphasizes the Party-state’s powerful reach into the most basic levels of student communities. The most important pillar of

31 Israel 1969, 329.

32 For an interesting account of the organizational structure of university students in the early PRC, see Walder 2009, 1–27. See also Chen 1951; Hsu 1964; Price 1970.

33 After 1989, the Communist Party committees in most universities created a new student work department (SWD), which is on a par with the traditional organizational, propaganda and united front departments. An interesting account of the creation of SWD in Tsinghua University can be found in Fang 2003, 373–374.

Figure 1: **Organizational Structure of Student Control at a Provincial University in Central China**



Source:

Based on the author's fieldwork conducted in Wuhan, Hubei province, June 2011.

this structure is the revived post of political counsellor (*zhengzhi fudao yuan* 政治辅导员) (PC). Instruction No. 24 issued by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in July 2006 mandates that a PC should be present in all college and university classrooms – a practice that was abandoned during the later Maoist years. The document also prescribes that “PCs ... should have a dual identity as both a teacher and a Party-state cadre” and that “they are the primary working force for the moral and ideological education of university students.”<sup>34</sup> The MoE

34 Ministry of Education 2006.

stipulates that “the ratio of PCs to students should be 1:200.”<sup>35</sup> In some universities, PCs are required to remain in regular residence in the student dormitories.<sup>36</sup> By maintaining daily contact, surveillance and control over the students, these basic-level cadre-teachers constitute the backbone of the PRC’s university control apparatus.

In addition, in a legacy leftover from Maoist times, all students in China today are organized into a quasi-military structure that extends from the basic-level classrooms (班级 *ban ji*), to year cohort (年级 *nian ji*), all the way up to university level. The student Party branch (SPB), which comprises all the student Party members in a unit, is considered the most powerful self-regulating agency. Representing the authority of the Party-state, the SPB is in charge of recruiting new Party members, conducting regular political reviews of ordinary students, recommending candidates for student cadre appointments, collecting information on students’ “trends of thought” (*sixiang dongtai* 思想动态), and making decisions on important matters related to the interests of the entire unit.<sup>37</sup> Combining control, surveillance and “self-management,” the post-Deng student control apparatus bears a remarkable similarity in structural terms with that of the pre-Cultural Revolution era and, indeed, remains a giant “interlocking pyramid” of Party machinery.<sup>38</sup>

## Control Measures

A solid organizational framework inherited from the past is only one side of the story. How these structures are strategically deployed by the authorities in the new era is, of course, the other issue. During the Maoist years, the mass-movement model of control ensured ideological and political congruence between students and the Party-state by mobilizing the educated youth into a host of state-sanctioned mass campaigns. With a pragmatic and materialistic cohort of Party technocrats in power, the post-Deng student control apparatus appears to be more depoliticized, bureaucratic and materialistic, and is driven by more concrete and tangible incentives rather than by ideological causes. Bureaucratic surveillance and hierarchical intervention have supplanted political indoctrination and mobilization as the main instruments of power, while regular Party-state cadre-teachers have replaced campaign activists and other extreme-left radicals as the primary scions tasked with keeping the Party-state’s grip on the student body. The most important control measures used on university campuses during the post-Deng era will be explored in this section.

### *Ideological monitoring and control*

As universal political zeal fades away in the post-Deng era, the CCP’s more orthodox method of ideological indoctrination – the political education

35 Ibid., Article 6.

36 Ibid.

37 Interview with university students and student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011, and Hong Kong, April 2011.

38 Walder 2009, 21.



course – has flourished again in university classrooms. The Party-state blamed inadequate training in orthodox Marxist thought as one of the major causes behind the political turmoil in Tiananmen Square in 1989.<sup>39</sup> In March 1991, China’s rising paramount leader, Jiang Zemin 江泽民, wrote to the Ministry of Education requesting that enhanced education concerning China’s revolutionary history be introduced throughout the entire educational curriculum from elementary schools to universities.<sup>40</sup> Since then, the regime has endeavoured to rebuild a complete ideological education curriculum for higher education. Since the late 1990s, university students in the arts and social sciences have been required to complete 315 academic hours of political education courses. Students in the physical sciences and engineering disciplines have to complete 210 academic hours.<sup>41</sup> In 1998, the CCP’s Central Organizational Department and the MoE issued a joint statement requiring that all political education courses in the 21st century be “centred around the study of Deng Xiaoping Theory and systematically teach the basic theories of Marxism as well as patriotism, collectivism and socialism.”<sup>42</sup> As a result, a new system called “the two classes” (*liangke* 两课) was introduced, which comprises compulsory Marxist education and moral training courses.<sup>43</sup> This special political curriculum has included required courses on the Chinese Communist Revolution and the CCP’s guiding ideology du jour (for example, the “three represents” theory in the late 1990s, and the “scientific development” theory in the early 21st century).

In addition to a formal and compulsory curriculum emphasizing dogmatic ideology, political education relevant to current affairs and policies is carried out on a regular basis. According to our interviewees, these “everyday” political education events vary in format, but include regular class meetings (*banhui* 班会), Communist Youth League (CYL) meetings (*tuanhui* 团会), reading sessions (*dushu hui* 读书会), and SPB meetings (*danghui* 党会). A Party school for university students also operates on each campus and serves as an important centre for routine ideological training.<sup>44</sup>

39 Li 1992.

40 Jiang 1992, 479–480.

41 Xiamen University Archives and Research Office of University History 2006, 330.

42 Gong, Zhang and Zhang 2003, 397.

43 For example, in the university where I conducted fieldwork, the “two classes” include a series of political education courses, including: (1) Introduction to the Basic Theories of Marxism; (2) Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and Theories on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics; (3) Introduction to Modern and Contemporary Chinese History; and (4) Moral Education and Basic Knowledge on Law. These classes form part of a compulsory course which is spread over four consecutive semesters; it is necessary to achieve a pass in each of them in order to graduate. Course content covers basic Marxist principles, the CCP’s official political discourse, the CCP’s revolutionary history, basic civic education, instruction in patriotism, and knowledge of the legal system. These courses are taught not by regular university faculty members, but by a special teaching unit, specifically set up for the teaching of political education courses, under the auspices of the Communist Party committee. The courses are usually conducted in the format of weekly lectures plus occasional tutorial discussions and field activities. Interview with university students, Wuhan, June 2011.

44 People.com.cn 1996. “Zhongguo gongchandang putong gaodeng xuexiao jiceng zuzhi gongzuo tiaoli” (Chinese Communist Party regulations on basic level work in ordinary institutions of higher education), 18 March, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/71380/71387/71589/5527096.html>. Accessed 8 May 2011. Article 19 requires that every university in China should create and sponsor a Party school.

Special ideological campaigns are launched periodically by the Party-state – for example, “Maintaining the advanced nature of Communist Party members” and the “Celebration of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the CCP.” Such campaigns inevitably serve to convey an additional dose of political indoctrination for students.

In the event of extraordinary political situations arising outside the campus walls, urgent political study sessions are convened as a means to both pacify the students and to limit their mobility for the duration of the crisis. For example, in the spring of 2011 when overseas websites called upon Chinese youth to launch a “Jasmine revolution,” university students were immediately summoned for special study sessions to insulate them from “oppositional forces.”<sup>45</sup> Such political reinforcement also occasionally takes the form of patriotic ceremonies. For example, during the 2003 SARS epidemic, the CYL at Peking University held a ceremony in Tiananmen Square pledging allegiance to the Party. As one internal report described it,

On the morning of 1 July 2003, more than 100 CYL members from Peking University ... came to Tiananmen Square to participate in a national flag raising ceremony. After the ceremony, students ... chanted slogans such as “Keep our heart with the Communist Party” or “Reconstruct our glorious achievements.”<sup>46</sup>

However, unlike the indoctrination of the Maoist period, these ideological education sessions have not been particularly successful in convincing today’s university students to accept the government’s bromide and dogma. A survey of university students conducted in 2003 found that 76 per cent of those surveyed either generally or completely disagreed with the “socialist principle of collectivism” as taught in political education classes.<sup>47</sup> More often than not, these sessions serve as a political ritual during which participants act “as if” they believe in the official ideologies, and demonstrate loyalty to the regime in public and among their peers. Certainly, the regime seeks to filter out or deter anyone who would dare to exercise open defiance during such mass rituals.

In her study of the personal cult of Hafez al-Assad in Syrian politics, Lisa Wedeen looks into “the role of rhetoric and symbols in producing political power in the absence of belief or emotional commitment.”<sup>48</sup> Wedeen argues that rituals and ideological spectacles constitute “a strategy of domination based on compliance” produced through “enforced participation in rituals of obeisance that are transparently phony both to those who orchestrate them and to those who ‘consume’ them.”<sup>49</sup> This form of domination is what Wedeen labels as “disciplinary-symbolic power.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly in the PRC, university ideological education activities serve to insist on ritualistic loyalty rather than

45 Interview with student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011. See also Guan 2004, 68–83.

46 Guan 2004, 59.

47 Wan and Zhang 2005, 12, 139.

48 Wedeen 1999, 5.

49 *Ibid.*, 5.

50 *Ibid.*, 145–152.

to win true ideological adherence. This kind of “expressed” loyalty in ceremonial activities is important for a ruling regime that is gradually losing its idealist appeal to the masses. After all, as Žižek notes, “the only real obedience ... is an ‘external’ one: obedience out of conviction is not real obedience because it is already ‘mediated’ through our subjectivity.”<sup>51</sup>

The “fatiguing, depoliticizing, cynicism-producing effects”<sup>52</sup> of the official political discourse create a prevailing atmosphere of detachment from any form of political life on PRC university campuses. A depoliticized student populace aligns well with the Foucaultian concept of a “docile body,” and this may be helpful for disciplinary control. Nevertheless, widespread cynicism and political apathy may also threaten to alienate PRC university students from the incumbent political regime, and develop into an alternative force of silent defiance. Again, as Žižek contends, “even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.”<sup>53</sup> There is, as always, “a politics of depoliticization.”<sup>54</sup>

Recognizing the danger embedded in political cynicism, the authorities have explored other means of reaching out to the students in a more proactive but less-provocative manner. Compulsory counselling is one such channel. For instance, Peking University operates a so-called “consultation system” (*huishang zhidu* 会商制度). This system requires university political cadres to monitor the thoughts and behaviour of ten different categories of students (including students who have “radical ideas,” an unsatisfactory academic performance, “independent lifestyles,” or are mentally fragile). The cadres conduct periodic one-to-one consultation sessions with these students.<sup>55</sup> Also, a nationwide programme conducted by the CYL requests that university political cadres provide adequate guidance to students on “critical points in their thought development” (*sixiang guanjiedian yindao* 思想关节点引导), i.e. things that might lead to doubts about the legitimacy of the regime. As one political cadre explained in an interview, one of the critical points was “to convince the students to connect their patriotic love of their motherland to love of the Communist Party.”<sup>56</sup>

Mental health monitoring (*xinli weisheng jiance* 心理卫生监测) has developed into a novel instrument used by the Party-state to monitor students’ thoughts and detect irregularities. Predictably, the scope of mental health monitoring is defined much more widely than in most Western countries. In this context, mental illness includes not only clinical mental problems, but also abnormal, defiant or radical socio-political thoughts or behaviour.<sup>57</sup> At most universities, students are

51 Žižek 2008b, 35.

52 Wedeen 1999, 150.

53 Žižek 2008b, 30.

54 I thank the anonymous reviewer of the *The China Quarterly* for suggesting this term.

55 News.163.com. 2011. “Beida jiang dui ‘sixiang pianji’ deng shilei xuesheng jinxing huishang” (Beijing University to conduct joint consultation with ten categories of students including those with radical thoughts), 25 March, <http://news.163.com/11/0325/03/6VV9LSVK00014AED.html>. Accessed 12 May 2012.

56 Interview with university official, Wuhan, June 2011.

57 Interview with university officials and political counsellors, Wuhan, June 2011, and Hangzhou, June 2011.

monitored from day one. At one of universities where I conducted fieldwork, all first-year students are required to submit to a lengthy mental health screening (usually conducted by questionnaire) during orientation. Results obtained from this screening are thoroughly studied and analysed by political officers, and the students are placed under careful scrutiny if an irregularity is identified. Follow-up political consultations might be arranged.<sup>58</sup> In each *banji* (the basic organizational level of university students), there is a special student cadre – the “commissioner of mental health” (CMH). According to an interviewee, these CMHs serve, by and large, as informants. They detect “irregular mental conditions” at an early stage and report them to the appropriate university cadres. Today, mental health monitoring and intervention have become an important control mechanism in China’s universities, through which the Party-state can maintain surveillance over the students’ thoughts, identify abnormalities, issue early alerts, and intervene whenever necessary.

### *Managing student groups*

Student groups constitute a vibrant part of campus life and have served as an important mobilizing resource for student movements in the past. Flourishing student groups and activity clubs are prominent features of the university campus in post-Deng China. The management and control of these organizations has become yet another important mission for the regime. Student groups are generally categorized into three types: the CYL, the student union, and miscellaneous student clubs/societies. The student union is the officially endorsed union representing the entire student body, but the CYL (staffed by full-time Communist Party cadres with the assistance of part-time student cadres) enjoys the most prominent status among the three. The CYL is entrusted by the Communist Party to advise the student union, manage student groups/societies, and oversee all student activities held on campus. As a CYL publication says, “[t]he sole purpose of the CYL’s work is to educate and guide the youth ... in the direction set by the Communist Party.”<sup>59</sup>

The CYL exercises systematic and thorough political control over all student groups. The monitoring process first begins when a student group is proposed. The CYL usually requires that the prospective group obtain the endorsement of a faculty-level Party committee (regardless of the club’s nature), and that final approval can only be granted when the university-level CYL is satisfied with the endorsed proposal.<sup>60</sup> In most universities, student groups also have to pass an annual review conducted by the CYL; groups that are deemed politically sensitive are refused registration renewal. These administrative hoops effectively

58 Interview with political counsellors, Wuhan, June 2011.

59 Guan 2004, 230.

60 Interview with student group leaders, Wuhan, June 2011.

rule out the possibility of any undesirable student groups legally operating on university campuses.

The CYL enjoys a monopoly over the distribution of the campus resources (such as classrooms, meeting spaces, bulletin boards and funding) upon which student groups rely to hold their activities. Registered student groups' requests for these resources are decided on a case-by-case basis after a careful review of the contents, format and possible audience for the event. The criteria used by the CYL for this review varies according to each case and context. For example, one interviewee recalled that when the Jasmine revolution was active in 2011, the university CYL significantly tightened their review of student activities to the point that a fund-raising event for a climbing club was not permitted.<sup>61</sup> More customary rules are in place, too. For instance, in 2002 the provincial CYL of a central province issued a document banning any inter-university collaboration for student group activities, a measure apparently intended to prevent cross-campus mobilization from taking place.<sup>62</sup>

### *“Professionals-in-waiting”*

An important structural feature of the student body in post-Deng Chinese universities is the ratio between science and engineering students on the one hand, and humanities and social science students on the other. In 2010, 1,113 of the 2,358 universities and colleges in China, or 47 per cent of the total, were institutions devoted to vocational training.<sup>63</sup> That same year, 5,754,245 university students graduated. Of those, 4,095,814 (or 71 per cent) majored in science, engineering, agriculture, medicine or managerial science.<sup>64</sup> Another other significant change for university students is the dismantling of the state-controlled job-assignment mechanism; graduates in China today have to compete for jobs in a highly competitive employment market.

Given the development of practice-oriented disciplines and the pressures of a harsh job market, China's universities have increasingly bowed to the imperative of the flourishing socialist market economy, which has resulted in the complete commercialization of higher education. They are no longer “ivory towers” from where the current and future intelligentsia criticize political authorities, but instead have gradually been transformed into the major suppliers of manpower for the country's economic boom. In addition, the Party-state's 1999 decision to increase significantly the nationwide admission quota for colleges and universities has further diluted the traditional identity of university students as “elites-in-waiting” who presume to share a duty with other elites for the betterment of national politics.<sup>65</sup> As China's universities shift their focus to providing

61 Interview with former student group leader, Hong Kong, March 2011.

62 Interview with student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011.

63 Xie 2011, 21.

64 Ibid., 34.

65 For China's decision in 1990 to increase university admission quotas significantly, and the consequential impact, see Bai 2006.

an education for the broader masses rather than just the elite, students suffer from intense insecurity, self-doubt and anxiety about their future lives.<sup>66</sup> Inevitably, these pressures lead many Chinese students to choose to detach themselves from China's critical intelligentsia and instead align themselves with a much more politically apathetic and compliant professional working class. This new identity change from presumptive elites to "professionals-in-waiting" has had a profound political impact.

### *Rewarding loyalty*

A crucial element in the battle for political control in authoritarian regimes is the generating of compliance incentives. In the post-Deng era, where the leadership has determinedly denied legal standing to any mass movement, the Party-state embraces more pragmatic means to accomplish this important task. Supported by the Party-state's monopoly over various forms of social, political and economic resources, this is a system that decidedly focuses on the bestowing of benefits, gifts and privileges in exchange for political compliance and conformity.

With traditional control measures such as compulsory job assignments waning in the context of all-rounded marketization, the material benefits associated with CCP membership are becoming the most important incentives for political loyalty. CCP membership is dispensed to a small portion of university students through a highly selective, secretive and elitist process.<sup>67</sup> According to the Central Organizational Department, 11 per cent of the total university student population of China were CCP members in 2010.<sup>68</sup> As the dominant political authority in China, CCP membership is associated with a variety of privileges and benefits that are unavailable to ordinary students. The prospect of membership attracts those students who seek promising careers and good lifestyles after graduation. For example, most (if not all) Party and government agencies either require CCP membership, or give priority to applicants who are CCP members, when they recruit new cadres from universities.<sup>69</sup> CCP student members also enjoy significant advantages when they compete for employment at lucrative state-owned enterprises, according to student interviewees. Access to "occupational opportunities" serves as a strong incentive for political loyalty in a time of high unemployment and expanded university enrolment. According to a 2009 survey conducted by PRC researchers, only 12.92 per cent of student applicants for Party membership claim they actually "believe in Communism," while the rest all cite materialistic purposes.<sup>70</sup>

66 This was also the case in East European countries after the Second World War. The specialization and expansion of higher education institutions in those countries, following the Soviet Model, resulted in higher levels of conformity, anxiety and pressure among university students. See Neave 2011.

67 Interview with university students and student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011.

68 Yang 2011.

69 Interview with university students and student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011.

70 Liu, Hao and He 2009, 21.

Another powerful reward for political compliance is the “direct admission to graduate school” scheme (*baoyan* 保研), through which those students who have been scrutinized and selected by the university authorities and endorsed by the MoE can enter graduate school directly, bypassing the extremely fierce National Admission Examinations for Graduate Schools. Although different universities may set up their own procedures for selecting this lucky group of students, most give considerable weight to the political performance of the candidates. The Party-state’s most loyal collaborators – student cadres, official student union leaders, the CYL cadres and activists – are always given priority when such quotas are allocated.<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, students who violate the code of appropriate political conduct may be “excluded from *baoyan* consideration,” regardless of the violator’s academic performance.

When compared to the Maoist-era when CCP cadres could allocate jobs for all graduating students, it would appear that the transition to a socialist market economy and the growth of the private sector have weakened the universities’ control over students’ career prospects. Nevertheless, university administrators still hold considerable power when recommending their preferred candidates to Party-state agencies or state-owned enterprises, as such employers usually solicit the opinions of the university’s political cadres at the outset of their hiring process. Additionally, some employment information, such as how to gain direct entry into local Party-states as a “cadre trainee” (*xuandiao sheng* 选调生) or recruitment into the military officer corps, is only disseminated through the university’s Communist Party hierarchy and becomes yet another carrot used by authorities to reward loyalty.

### *Critical and sensitive periods*

While certain political control measures are daily routine, a crucial mission for all universities in post-Deng China is imposing tighter control during “critical and sensitive periods” (*mingan qi* 敏感期) (CSP). A CSP is usually initiated or designated by the state, and they can be established for different reasons. Some CSPs are regular (such as the week before and after the anniversary of the June Fourth Movement, and the week before the plenum session of the National People’s Congress); others are sporadic yet predictable (usually before major social or political events); and some are in response to sudden or unpredictable crises (such as the SARS epidemic, or the Jasmine revolution).<sup>72</sup> Scholars of student political movements realize the crucial role of a “triggering event” in arousing or agitating activism, and so does the CCP.<sup>73</sup> The primary purpose of the extra control during CSPs is to prevent potential student activists from seizing the triggering event(s)

71 Interview with former student cadres, Hong Kong, March 2011.

72 Interview with university officials and student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011.

73 For “triggering event,” see Bakke and Bakke 1971, 493–97.



and assigning them “symbolic political connotations” in order to springboard a movement.<sup>74</sup>

During CSPs – be they designated or announced – the control mechanisms installed in university campuses become much more oppressive. Additional measures are implemented to secure tranquillity or to eliminate potential protest before it surfaces. CSPs feature efficient, intimate and real-time collaboration between the university administration and the state law-enforcement agencies in detecting possible student unrest and preventing large-scale gatherings from taking place.<sup>75</sup> As stated, many CSPs are planned for in advance. Every anniversary of the 1989 student movement, for example, is a time of high alert for university officials and student cadres all over China. Other CSPs are irregular, but no less dangerous. For example, the government informed university officials about the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1998, and asked the cadres to announce a CSP as promptly as possible.<sup>76</sup> Interviewees also reported that governments at different levels requested CSP-enhanced controls during the Jasmine revolution, as well as during recent outbursts of nationalist demonstrations in urban centres.<sup>77</sup> According to one official’s account:

Now we have information transmission and sharing mechanisms with the state authorities [during CSPs]. Once there is important information [about possible student action], it can be disseminated efficiently [among officials]. And if there is any sign of a potential public protest, the university will take prompt action. Usually the provincial department of education will alert the student work department of our university. Administrators in charge of student affairs (normally the vice-secretary of the Communist Party committee) will be summoned to an urgent meeting to deliberate on the situation and subsequently all the political counsellors will be notified about decisions made at that meeting.<sup>78</sup>

An essential component of student control during CSPs is the round-the-clock surveillance and curtailing of student activities. Official student meetings are more frequently convened. The university administrators or political officials also reach out individually to targeted members of the student population. During the 2009 Uyghur riots in Xinjiang, for example, political officials at a central Chinese university were asked to call upon each student hailing from Xinjiang to make sure that s/he did not harbour any form of grievance or discontent against the state. Student cadres were also asked to pay closer attention to those students’ thoughts and behaviours.<sup>79</sup> The official student union or the CYL will usually organize more recreational or extracurricular activities during these periods to distract students from political events, while activities organized by other student groups or clubs are either cancelled or severely restricted.

74 Johnston 2011, 122.

75 Interview with student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011.

76 Interview with university officials, Wuhan, June 2011.

77 Interview with political counsellors, university officials and student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011.

78 Interview with university students, Wuhan, June 2011. However, an interesting observation is that some students tend to regard the university’s prompt response to politically sensitive events as an “over-reaction.” In a sense, the preventive measures taken by the university somewhat facilitate the spread of information about the oppositional movement.

79 Interview with student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011.



According to one student leader, the university administrators specifically approached leaders of popular student clubs during the Jasmine revolution to advise them not to use their influence to mobilize their members/followers to organize or attend any public demonstrations.<sup>80</sup>

Student informants are also widely deployed by universities during CSPs. From our interviews, it is obvious that political officials in Chinese universities routinely recruit informants among the ordinary students to monitor their classmates and report any “radical remarks.”<sup>81</sup> One political official in a national university described the duties of student informants:

[Student informants] are charged with reporting [unusual conditions] to ... political counsellors, all the way up to the secretary of the university Communist Party committee... They garner all sorts of information, with a focus on students who have difficulties with their studies ... or those who have mental irregularities. The student informants are obliged to identify and report such instances. Of course, other student cadres also carry this duty but the student informants do this round-the-clock.<sup>82</sup>

Another university administrator emphasized that student informants are directly controlled by the university-level political cadres, rather than by the academic staff or faculties.<sup>83</sup> Informants are asked to report on the condition of the student body more frequently during CSPs.

During CSPs, universities tighten online controls over the campus computer network and the monitoring of online postings on campus forums is increased.<sup>84</sup> Political officials and CYL cadres monitor and manage public discussions floating on the university computer network on a daily basis. However, extra caution is exercised during CSPs. University administrators (sometimes a special office in charge of network management) carry out 24-hour monitoring of the online postings and chat-room contents. On occasions when officials feel that online remarks have become too radical or provocative, the informants are asked to write follow-up postings to rebut the more outrageous remarks. This tactic is referred to in the Party’s official discourse as “opinion guiding” (*yulun yindao* 舆论引导).<sup>85</sup> Instigators of political rumours, radical commentaries and agitating messages are carefully identified, their comments removed or traced, and, in the more serious instances, they are investigated.<sup>86</sup> As a policy report suggests, “it is important that we fully deploy political counsellors, student Party members, student

80 Interview with student cadres, Hong Kong, March 2011.

81 Interview with former political counsellor, Wuhan, June 2011.

82 Interview with university official, Wuhan, June 2011.

83 Ibid.

84 Interview with former student cadre, Hong Kong, March 2011.

85 Interview with former student cadre, Hong Kong, February 2011. One PRC author summarizes the tasks as: (1) regulating students’ online activities; (2) monitoring postings on hot political topics and removing those that are forbidden by the state; (3) enhancing the filtering of emails to defend the campus from outside “information bombing;” (4) taking disciplinary action against students who spread “unhealthy information” or publish “reactionary articles” on the internet; and (5) constantly collecting and analysing online information, controlling information sources and giving individual attention to students who have demonstrated problematic political thought. See Xu 2007, 229.

86 Interview with university official, Wuhan, June 2011.

cadres and student activists and set up ‘detectors for information’ in every space in which students live.”<sup>87</sup>

Universities finance and support the development of officially endorsed student websites or forums to compete with the more unruly websites run privately by students. These “official” student websites enjoy enormous advantages in terms of funding, manpower and logistical support. While other unofficial campus websites/forums might be temporarily suspended during CSPs, university administrators grant the official student websites a de facto monopoly over information flow, as well as forums for public discussion.<sup>88</sup> In recent years, with Web2.0 services such as social media websites, instant messaging services and Twitter/mini-blogs (*weibo* 微博) flourishing in China, students tend to use these 24-hour cheap and convenient forums for association and communication. Most classes, organizations and dormitories have created their own internet groups in various formats. Political cadre-teachers and student activists are also asked to monitor these internet groups closely in order to police student thinking and divert their energies in times of heightened political sensitivity.<sup>89</sup> All of these measures provide the university administrators and political officials with real-time, on-site and efficient means through which to gather information, identify abnormalities, shape public discourse and ultimately prevent radical student collective action from taking place on university campuses.

## Conclusion

Scholars have long attempted to decode the “black-box” of authoritarian politics. However, as David Art argues in a recent article, asymmetric attention has been given to the quasi-democratic institutions and features of these regimes, at the expense of examining the control and coercion components in such systems.<sup>90</sup> To achieve a thorough understanding of the political process and power distribution in non-democratic systems, it is all the more important to look into the institutions, mechanisms, and methods used by authoritarian rulers to control their subjects. University students are certainly one of the most crucial links in the autocratic chain of control.

In his study on the political socialization of youth and university students in Fascist Italy and Spain, Gino Germani argues that authoritarian regimes have to face the “contradictions of participation and control.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, autocratic rulers need to “generate the active mobilisation of youth and their creative participation in the regime” while maintaining rigid control to prevent them from

87 Liu, Hao and He 2009, 129.

88 Interview with current and former student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011, and Hong Kong, March 2011.

89 Interview with university officials, political counsellors and student cadres, Wuhan, June 2011, and Hong Kong, February, March and April 2011.

90 Art 2012.

91 Germani 1970, 354.

transforming into anti-systemic forces.<sup>92</sup> Hence, in different stages in their evolution, autocratic states often emphasize one value above another to cope with particular domestic and international situations. In Maoist China, the Party-state deployed a “participation-oriented” approach to control the student population. Using the mobilized students as a social base for Mao’s Cultural Revolution against the Party bureaucracy, the revolutionary regime ensured political and ideological congruence between itself and the students.

In the post-Deng era, however, the control apparatus imposed on university students appears to be highly de-politicized, bureaucratic and pragmatic. Having learned from experiences both in China and abroad, the Party-state refrains from using outright coercion or repression to maintain its grip over the student body. On the contrary, it now turns to political rituals to solicit public affirmation of political conformity, and uses materialistic incentives to generate compliance. “Careerism” and “apoliticism” have replaced ideological devotion and zeal.<sup>93</sup> Subtly refined surveillance and intervention networks monitor the student body, and a vast system of censorship and control prevents students mobilizing into an organized force that might threaten the stability of the campus, city, province or nation.

Engineering stability and crafting compliance have become the top priorities for the CCP in the early 21st century. The institutionalized control mechanisms operating on university campuses have certainly contributed to the general stability of the PRC regime over the past two decades. However, the long-term sustainability of this system has been widely questioned. The de-politicization of university campuses may result in short-term tranquillity, but may also cause long-term “alienation” in an entire generation of educated youth. The kind of political cynicism and apathy that is found among today’s university students in China may lead to any of several outcomes. First, cynicism and apathy may become a form of silent defiance. The students’ public performances of obedience, conformity or indifference might imply more radical and provocative political discourses in private or virtual spaces. Second, when energetic university students refrain from expressing their grievances, opinions or disagreements, the accumulated negative sentiment might one day explode in a devastating manner. Third, the Party-state could face a general loss of legitimacy. The CCP’s political domination has traditionally depended on its ability to penetrate the complex fabric of Chinese society. It has also depended on maintaining a semblance of ideological and organizational congruence between the regime and the people. If the social subjects start to turn their backs on the regime in a cynical move, the Party-state’s governance and legitimacy might face serious challenges. How this generation of apolitical university-educated youth influences China’s political future will remain a challenging question for decades to come.

92 *Ibid.*, 355.

93 *Ibid.*, 363.

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