

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Affiliated Associations in China's Education Sector: Between Passive Autonomy, Discretion and Control

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Abstract

Under President Xi Jinping, the strengthening of the Chinese Communist Party's political control occurs in conjunction with an evolving administrative role for government-affiliated associations. Analysing associations that are subordinate within China's strict hierarchy but which have degrees of operational freedom yields insights into the changing nature of public service and administration in China. Evidence from 63 interviews conducted from 2018 to 2022 with government departments and affiliated associations in the education sector reveals the complexity of state control and degrees of constrained autonomy achieved by affiliated associations. The government exerts control over financing, personnel appointments and core business activities but, over time, associations gain varying degrees of operational autonomy to influence the education agenda and fill gaps in public services. The interdependency and relational variance we find in the case of Ministry of Education-affiliated associations contributes to broader understandings of the complex and fragmentary nature of the Chinese state and public administration.

摘要

在习近平主席的领导下, 中国共产党的政治控制得以加强, 同时政府直属社团的行政角色也在不断演变. 分析在中国严格的等级制度中直属于政府但具有一定程度自主性的社团, 可以洞悉中国公共服务和行政管理的变化. 2018年至2022年对教育行政部门和直属社团的63次访谈证据显示出国家控制的复杂性以及直属社团获得的不同程度且有限的自主性. 政府对资金、人事任命和核心业务活动施加控制, 但随着时间的推移, 社团获得了不同程度的运营自主权, 以影响教育议程并填补公共服务的空白. 我们在教育部直属社团的案例中发现的相互依赖和关系变化, 有助于更为广泛地理解中国国家与公共行政的复杂性和碎片化.

Keywords: affiliated associations; state control; autonomy; education; China

关键词: 直属社团; 国家控制; 自主性; 教育; 中国

In 2013, during the Third Plenary of the 18th Party Congress, China's new leadership under Xi Jinping 习近平 called for more autonomy for associations that coordinate with, but operate outside, the formal state apparatus. Political circumstances change, however, and during the 19th Party Congress in 2017 President Xi reinforced the fundamental principle that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controls all core government work and administrative units. The conflicting goals of improving non-state capacities while strengthening Party control raise questions about the ambiguous nature of public administration in China today. This is particularly salient in the higher education sector, where CCP ideology is disseminated and where the presence of the Party is found in every public and private institution.¹ Affiliated associations in China tend to have operational autonomy rather than legal or political autonomy.

¹ Bodenhorn, Burns and Palmer 2020.

Party-affiliated associations in the Chinese education sector are controlled by the government through high-level personnel appointments, performance evaluations, formative loyalty tests and business management standards. The Chinese system of control helps to explain how certain types of autonomy emerge over time, from the initial establishment of the affiliated association to the point at which the state and associations become co-dependent. Party-affiliated associations are purposively established by the government and beholden to the ministries and departments they serve. The Ministry of Education monitors the productivity, loyalty and discipline of affiliated associations, which often pursue a strategy of blame avoidance and seek to share credit for positive policy and public service outcomes. Political correctness allows affiliated associations to conduct their business as education influencers and service providers with varying degrees of passive autonomy and discretion. The scope of autonomy has not changed as much as expected under the autocratic leadership of Xi Jinping.

Affiliated associations are registered by the Civil Affairs Department. They generally conform to their role expectations but, in key sectors such as education, they have forms of autonomy and discretion to recruit members, manage personnel, gauge public opinion and respond to social needs. In China today, every government ministry works with affiliated associations. Their composition and structure are determined by the state, but associations have some operational autonomy and fill gaps in public service. Chinese civil society has a high degree of dependency on the government for its organizational survival.² Organizational priorities often align with government preferences, but within this structure of control, affiliated associations can act as intermediaries that serve constituencies in novel ways. The China Youth Development Foundation, established in 1989 and still one of the most prominent affiliated associations, offers a template for how to strategically exploit the divisions within the Chinese party-state to achieve organizational goals, gain legitimacy and address pressing social issues.³

This article draws on evidence derived from 63 interviews, conducted from 2018 to 2022, with members of the six affiliated associations working with China's Ministry of Education and government officials in Beijing, and supplemented with Chinese language studies and reports. Unelected performance-based regimes often interact with non-state actors to acquire information about citizen preferences that then determines patterns of resource allocation and public service.⁴ We advance the arguments that Chinese civil society (in our case, affiliated associations) builds alliances with the state to secure resources and shape policy agendas,⁵ usually under conditions of unbalanced reciprocity,⁶ while operating with degrees of constrained autonomy.⁷ Degrees of de facto autonomy emerge from relations with their professional management unit, levels of financial independence and diverse networks of support. We adopt Fengshi Wu's middle ground transformation model rather than a dichotomous state-versus-society model to explain the heterogeneous nature of the state and affiliated associations, and their multifarious interactions.⁸ Affiliated associations operate in this middle ground as intermediaries between state and society, serving the government, absorbing retired or surplus officials, attracting new and alternative membership, and operating with "considerable leeway" in their respective sectors.⁹

The Ministry of Education can establish affiliated associations, control their key personnel appointments, financial resources and the scope of their business in line with a partially dysfunctional corporatist framework,¹⁰ but these associations are positioned to influence education agendas and shape their organizational goals. Evidence from the Ministry of Education suggests that mechanisms

2 Lu 2009, 2.

3 Hsu 2016, 157.

4 Panaro *forthcoming*.

5 Hsu 2010.

6 Kang, Yi 2020.

7 Teets 2018.

8 Wu, Fengshi 2003.

9 *Ibid.*, 37.

10 Howell 2012.

of state control such as supervision, financing and evaluation by cadres operate differently within different associations. The Ministry of Education follows central supervisory standards for affiliated associations but cannot achieve total control over its auxiliary networks, given the complexities of policy implementation, the differential abilities of individual officials, unpredictable streams of finance, deep historical factors and rapidly changing business priorities. The inverse dependencies and relational variance found in the case of the six education-affiliated associations in China contributes to understandings of the complex nature of Chinese governance and public administration.

Conceptualizing Affiliated Associations in China

Advocacy coalitions and policy networks in authoritarian China have a more constrained space for action than is often found in democratic states, but there is still dynamism in China's system as non-state actors influence the normative orientations and preferences of policymakers.¹¹ China's dual system of governance enables CCP oversight and control over most aspects of policy and administration.¹² The evolving role of affiliated associations in key sectors, however, suggests that the Party recognizes the importance of intermediaries in improving education as a public good and a service to society. As an example of the dual system, China's universities have governance structures that are recognizable to a global audience, with executives, committees, senates, deans and so forth, but power ultimately resides with the Communist Party committee and secretary on each campus.¹³

Affiliated associations are not passive recipients of government contracts and mandates. They are influential actors that largely serve Party ends but can also exercise discretion and, unlike most government-led NGOs, they do not maintain internal Party cells or "police popular compliance with the Party line."¹⁴ The concept of "embedded activism" captures the flexibility within authoritarian regimes that indirectly provides space for NGOs and other associations to undertake collective action.¹⁵ Bing Guan uses the concept of "reverse embeddedness" to show how governments seek to embed themselves in NGOs and associations to maintain oversight and influence.¹⁶

Theories of fragmented authoritarianism¹⁷ and dispersed domination¹⁸ explain changing state-society relations in China as well as the changing policy arena and bureaucratic bargaining that takes place between principal and auxiliary members of policy networks. An "intertwining of politics and academia in university-state relations" in China is mirrored in the relations between affiliated associations and the government, resulting in a contradiction: the simultaneous enhancement of state control and increase in relative freedom that universities and affiliates gain from the state.¹⁹ The Chinese government's engagement with associations ranges from ritual subordination,²⁰ to symbiotic adaptive cooperation,²¹ to strategic forms of graduated control.²²

Ritual subordination and adaptive cooperation

Various types of state control result from associations' dependence on national policy directives, access to state financing and political networks.²³ Key indicators of state control include decisions

11 Teets 2018, 126.

12 Bodenhorn 2020, 974.

13 Hayhoe 2011, 16.

14 Thornton 2013, 3.

15 Ho and Edmonds 2007.

16 Guan 2015.

17 Mertha 2009.

18 Kang, Yi 2020.

19 Pan 2009, 2.

20 Deng 2012.

21 Yu and Shen 2017; Song 2018.

22 Kang, Xiaoguang, and Han 2008.

23 Zhang 2010; Huang and Ji 2014.

on personnel appointment, performance evaluation, financial management and business planning, although the differences between associations are often overlooked. This article demonstrates how external controls operate differently within different types of associations.

Assumptions about the ritual subordination of associations derive from a belief in contingent rather than absolute state control and the desire for effective public service through partnership.²⁴ When associations are first established, they lack experience and capacity and depend on state patronage and access to resources for help to develop their profile and capacity.²⁵ As associations gain established track records over time, they will maintain degrees of strategic reliance on the state as part of the institutional logic of survival and growth.²⁶ It is logical for affiliated associations to maintain good relations with the government, their main patron, while gradually seeking autonomy to set their own agendas and carry out activities. The apparent subordination of associations can be regarded as a kind of “ritual behaviour” whereby associations consciously adopt symbolic actions to show political loyalty to the state while striving for greater autonomy to manage their affairs.²⁷ Ritual subordination gives associations their quasi-official status and dualistic nature.²⁸

Cooperation between affiliated associations and the government is explained in part by the strategic importance of auxiliary members of policy networks. Jianxing Yu and Yongdong Shen use the adaptive cooperation approach to explain why, when the government encounters challenges, it actively cooperates with social organizations (affiliates in our case) within a system of control that allows non-state actors (auxiliary coalition members) to take strategic action, access resources and influence agendas.²⁹ This explanation is akin to the symbiotic approach where the government creates a flexible and competitive environment for social organizations, affiliated associations and NGOs to support government work in specific sectors, using their skillsets to bid for contracts and resources.³⁰ These approaches acknowledge the active role of organizations that compete for access and influence with the state while finding spaces to operate within China’s hierarchy. We view affiliated associations in the education sector as active, competitive members of China’s policy networks who are broadly cooperative but have their own interests and agendas.

Graduated controls

Kang Xiaoguang and Heng Han propose a model of “graduated controls” that refers to the government exerting different control strategies to regulate (enabling and restraining) different types of associations according to their potential to challenge the state and the type and value of public goods they provide.³¹ The state is not unitary but is composed of various competitive departments with their own interests and resources. The role conceptions of affiliated associations also vary depending on their relations with their respective departments and their constituents. With reference to the typology of organizations proposed by Kang and Han, education-linked affiliates are located between government-led NGOs and political associations such as government-established community organizations (*shequ juweihui* 社区居委会) and labour unions (*gonghui* 工会).³² The scope of activities undertaken by the associations do not directly threaten state legitimacy, and by many measures they buttress the state, but their ability to take credit for public service

24 Wu, Yue 2014.

25 Ibid.

26 Huang and Ji 2014.

27 Deng 2012.

28 Zhang 2010.

29 Yu and Shen 2017.

30 Gao and Tyson 2017.

31 Kang, Xiaoguang, and Han 2008.

32 Ibid.

achievements and gain status complicates relations, particularly when affiliates seize the initiative by performing functions that government departments are unable or unwilling to undertake.

The six Ministry of Education-affiliated associations experience state control in different ways and operate in a competitive field but broadly aim to cooperate with rather than oppose the state. Constrained autonomy should be understood in this context. There is variance within this model as the government needs associations for a variety of reasons. Affiliated associations can provide public services, undertake administrative functions and are sufficiently flexible to engage in political affairs that the government would rather avoid. Some associations are more cooperative than others, some are more ambitious in their pursuit of operational autonomy, and some try to exploit the system to gain advantages.

Case Selection and Methodology

Our approach is to move beyond the dichotomy of state control versus autonomy by appreciating the blurred lines of authority that exist and are utilized by affiliates to respond to policy agendas, provide public services and manage personnel. We compare the nature of state cooperation and control in all six Ministry of Education-affiliated associations in China. These associations have modern social organizational structures with representative assemblies and decision-making councils with elected members. Each affiliated association has its own board of supervisors and a secretariat, and their membership networks and organizations are found in cities throughout China. Affiliated associations are part of a subsidiary or adjunct form of government, working in parallel with parent ministries to provide public services but without the same intensity of restrictions and managerial controls that are imposed upon government departments. The key characteristics of each affiliated association are described in [Table 1](#), while [Table 2](#) explains the varied types of autonomy and control experienced by associations.

With approval from the Ministry of Education and support from the president of a prominent university in Beijing, we gained access to ministerial departments and affiliated associations. We conducted our first round of interviews with the six ministry-affiliated associations in Beijing from June to July 2018. By working with a team of Chinese researchers in Beijing, we were able to interview the head of each association and some staff (junior and mid-ranking) about a wide range of issues in a short period of time. We also interviewed government officials from the ministry's departments that have relevant financial relationships and business contacts with affiliated associations. Prior contact was made with all participants in the research, and we received prior approval for semi-structured interviews beginning with six questions for each association. These general questions concerned the process of establishing affiliates associations – when, why, how and by whom they were established – followed by standardized questions about the evolving role and function of affiliates, the changing scope of their business and their relations with departments from the Ministry of Education over time. We managed to conduct follow-up interviews with two associations and the Ministry of Education in 2021 and 2022 to clarify aspects of the structure and operations of affiliated associations, their leadership profiles, priorities, resources, annual financial reports and cooperation with government departments over time.

All participants in the research could speak freely, under condition of anonymity, about their experiences with affiliated associations, government policies to regulate and manage associations, and the structures of government control. It is acknowledged that biases exist, with some respondents constructing their own versions of reality and having their own motivations for participating in our study. We try to remain objective and impartial in our effort to empirically ascertain the complex nature of relations between the government and affiliated associations. To supplement our interview data, we accessed Chinese language academic studies and reports from the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the CCP, the Office of National Education Inspection and annual Ministry of Education reports about departmental supervision of, and cooperation with, affiliated associations.

Table 1: Characteristics of Affiliated Associations

Affiliated Association	Establishment	Staffing	Mandate
<i>Chinese Society of Education</i>	Founded in 1979 by the State Council and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.	President Zhu Zhiwen 朱之文 is a former deputy minister of education. There are 46 staff in Beijing, 54 locally staffed branches throughout the country and a membership network of 196 organizations.	Developing national education standards, promoting international exchange and carrying out academic research in the field of education studies.
<i>China Education Association for International Exchange</i>	Jointly established by the ministries of education and foreign affairs in 1981.	President Liu Limin 刘利民 is a former deputy minister of education. There are 63 central staff in Beijing, 16 locally staffed branches and an organizational membership of 877.	Runs an annual international education expo. Carries out international exchange and cooperation, raises foreign and domestic donations to support education, recruits foreign teachers, oversees non-governmental education exchange activities involving Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, manages intermediary organizations (<i>zhongjie zuzhi</i> 中介组织) for studying abroad and conducts quality assurance and certification.
<i>China Association of Higher Education</i>	Founded in 1983 by the Ministry of Education.	President Du Yubo 杜玉波 is a former deputy minister of education. There are 27 central staff (10 permanent) in Beijing, with 67 local branches and 450 members.	Core responsibility is carry out academic research related to education, international exchange and collaboration. Each year the association runs a major international forum on higher education.
<i>China Teacher Development Foundation</i>	Jointly established in 1986 by the State Commission Office of Public Sector Reform and the Ministry of Labour.	President Zhang Zhongyuan 张中原 is a former deputy minister of education. Out of 9 staff in the Beijing office, 6 are permanent. There are no branches or members.	Core responsibilities are teacher training, support and development for young teachers in rural areas and rewarding teaching excellence.
<i>Sports Federation</i>	Established in 1998 by the Ministry of Education after the merger of the China School Sports Federation and the Federation of University Sports of China.	President Xue Yanqing 薛彦青 is a former director of the department of international exchange, Ministry of Education. Liu Lixin 刘立新 is the current general secretary. There are 20 staff (8 permanent), 2 branches and no members.	The remit is to organize sports competitions for students, run the National University Games and improve extracurricular sports.
<i>China Education Development Foundation</i>	Jointly established in 2003 by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance.	President Yuan Guiren 袁贵仁 is a former minister of education with a high profile. There are 21 staff in Beijing, with no local branches or members.	Mandate is to provide national assistance for students and teachers, to improve school conditions and to promote the development of education. One prominent project undertaken recently by the association is the AI smart campus initiative.

Table 2: Variations in Affiliated Associations

Association	Type of Autonomy and Control		
	<i>Personnel Management</i>	<i>Finance and Resources</i>	<i>Business Operations</i>
<i>Chinese Society of Education (1979)</i>	Partial autonomy derives from the fact that the secretary general is appointed by the council rather than the government.	Control derives from dependence on government funding and resources.	Scope of business and operational autonomy has declined over the years, but new functions have been performed under the co-management of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Civil Affairs since 2014.
<i>China Education Association for International Exchange (1981)</i>	Control derives from a lack of permanent staffing and dependency on government approval for new posts. This association has additional layers of accountability as it traditionally reports to the department of international cooperation and exchange.	Partial autonomy derives from foreign donations and corporate sponsorship.	The international mandate of this association means that it has less autonomy, following a principle established by former premier, Zhou Enlai 周恩来, who served under Mao Zedong 毛泽东. The principle is that any education business with international dimensions needs government oversight and approval.
<i>China Association of Higher Education (1983)</i>	Partial autonomy derives from the vice-secretary's efforts to decouple from the Ministry of Education and set his own agenda.	Partial autonomy derives decoupling efforts because funding cuts by the Ministry of Education challenge the association to find independent projects and contracts.	Partial autonomy derives from the lack of government control over daily functions, branches and members, so the business agenda is more flexible.
<i>China Teacher Development Foundation (1986)</i>	Partial autonomy derives from the establishment of this association by former vice-president Wang Zhen 王震, who was its first chairman. The power and status of Wang Zhen limits the control of the Ministry of Education and leaves a legacy.	Partial autonomy derives from low dependency on government funding, for example only 2.3% of the 2020 budget came from government financial support.	Partial autonomy derives from high level of private income generation and ability to respond to problems in the education sector.
<i>Sports Federation (1998)</i>	Partial autonomy derives from the ambiguities of the association's position. It is unwilling to decouple from the Ministry of Education but has a flexible status because the association does not have an Organization Certificate Code from the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform.	Partial autonomy derives from revenue generation from corporate sponsorship linked to sports competitions.	Control derives from the uncertainties of the association's position, being without an official certification code, although this can also be an opportunity to operate with a degree of flexibility and improvisation. There is overlapping management from the department of sports, health and arts education, and the Ministry of Education.

(Continued)

Table 2: (Continued.)

Association	Type of Autonomy and Control		
	<i>Personnel Management</i>	<i>Finance and Resources</i>	<i>Business Operations</i>
<i>China Education Development Foundation (2003)</i>	Control derives from a lack of permanent staffing and dependency on government approval for new posts, but this equally means a lack of government oversight. The association has a flexible status because the association does not have an Organization Certificate Code and there are only 3 senior staff who are monitored by the government.	Partial autonomy derives from modest dependency on government financial support and a very large operating budget.	Partial autonomy derives from high level of private income generation and ability to respond to problems in the education sector.

Affiliated Associations: Between Cooperation and Control

In a fragmented authoritarian system, performance-driven government departments cooperate with affiliated associations in a power structure that legitimates the CCP while allowing auxiliary actors degrees of constrained autonomy. Subtle variations in relations between government departments and affiliates can be found in personnel management, resource distribution and business development. As public institutions, the association secretariats abide by government charters and regulations. Association leaders ranked above departmental level are appointed and managed by the government. Senior heads of associations are appointed by the powerful Central Committee of the CCP. Accordingly, the government controls most core members of the associations. The secretariats of affiliated associations implement Party policy, although at times they make independent decisions and may disregard resolutions adopted by the State Assembly. If there are no political conflicts between the government's agenda and an association's projects and activities, then association personnel are given the space to plan, operate and manage budgets.

Affiliated associations have modern, flexible organizational structures and remits that usually complement government departments. For example, the China Association of Higher Education, headquartered in Beijing with 67 branches throughout the country, has a member representative assembly that is the highest authority with responsibility for decision-making, formulating and amending the association charter, electing and dismissing members of the council, reviewing annual reports of the council and formulating strategy. The council is formally responsible to the association's general assembly, implementing the resolutions of the member representative assembly, as well as electing the president, vice-president, secretary general and other key posts. The secretariat is an executive body that presides over day-to-day operations and implements annual plans, nominates the deputy secretary general and the principal of each office branch, and decides on the employment of full-time staff. The board of supervisors is responsible for internal supervision, discipline and inspection. Despite the similarities in staffing and organizational structure, affiliated associations assume specific responsibilities and function as a special branch of the government that in effect enlarges the government without the same oversight or accountability.

China's unelected performance-based government wields considerable control, but within this system of control, affiliated associations have opportunities to influence policy and deliver public services. Establishing associations requires strong inter-organizational relationships. Personnel appointments are political, and funding and business development creates complex interdependencies between ministerial departments and their affiliates. The six affiliated associations working with the Ministry of Education were established in at least one of the following ways: (1) being jointly sponsored by different government departments; (2) being approved by former national leaders and then established by ministries; (3) being jointly established by the government and research institutes; and (4) being transferred from other government departments. Although the sponsors, organizers and members are different, one constant is the direct involvement of the government in the establishment of affiliated associations.

There are two guiding principles for the establishment of affiliated associations. The first is that they are needed by the government to help with important matters that the government is unable or unwilling to deal with. The second is in response to specific proposals by high-level officials in education and related sectors. These officials may be motivated by demands from the public or their constituents, special interest groups or, indeed, by the desire of the Party to establish affiliated associations to bolster its performance-based legitimacy. The development trajectory of affiliated associations is influenced by the priorities of the government, ministerial agendas, the nature of the relationship between association leaders and their political counterparts, the intensity of inter-association competition, and the specific value-added activities that affiliates can offer. Bureaucratic competition arises when there are other associations, institutions, civil society actors and even

government departments that can perform the same functions and gain recognition for their work. The main point is to legitimize the Party by delivering governance and public service outcomes.

The timing and political circumstances under which affiliated associations are established influence their growth trajectory. The stronger the relationship is with the government, the more stable the association is likely to be, although the arrival of newcomers can be disruptive, creating a crowding effect and overlapping mandates that lead to bureaucratic competition between affiliates operating in the same sectors and serving the same political agendas. Control over senior personnel management is a significant expression of power by the government. Party-appointed cadres control association secretariats, and yet high-level members can help the association bypass many of the restrictions from the Ministry of Education and the State Council. Control over funding is a blunt measure to ensure the financial dependence of affiliated associations, although in some cases associations benefit from the legitimizing effect of their relationship with the government via specific ministries and departments, as well as their performance and track records that allow them to generate private revenue. To understand how state control operates in the education sector, we examine the effects of personnel appointments, funding and business plans on relations between affiliated associations and the government.

Personnel and Performance Management

Relations between the government and affiliated associations are influenced by levels of government control of personnel management. The Ministry of Education takes an active interest in personnel as a means to control associations and because the role played by associations helps to enhance the government's performance legitimacy. When negotiating complex relationships with affiliates, government departments monitor their activities, undertake routine inspections and performance evaluations based on government standards for public institutions, and require that associations establish CCP branches (*dangzhibu* 党支部) to demonstrate their political loyalty. Associations face risks when they misinterpret government rules or overstep the rather opaque and rapidly changing boundaries set before them. Government officials, bureaucrats and members of affiliated associations alike focus on blame avoidance. The government conducts occasional inspections and audits to keep affiliated associations in line, but the actual business agenda is co-determined. Terry Bodenhorn shows that performance management and incentives can be highly subjective. In the case of middle and senior administrators in a Chinese university, peer evaluations focus on the difficulty, quality and significance of work, and effects on morale, teamwork and student perspectives on Party doctrine.³³

Personnel arrangements for affiliated associations create expectations for access to resources and benefits. Personnel in formal established positions (*bianzhi nei renyuan* 编制内人员) can settle in Beijing, which is a major incentive along with better salaries, promotions, healthcare and pensions. Temporary workers (*bianzhi wai renyuan* 编制外人员) do not enjoy the same benefits, and such differential status inevitably creates demand for permanent positions. Associations confirm that if there is not a permanent position on offer, personnel recruitment is very difficult. If the association "can't provide residential status and welfare benefits, young people will not be able to survive in Beijing," and at present there is an age imbalance among staff with permanent contracts.³⁴ To recruit younger staff, affiliated associations need more permanent positions, which can only be approved by the government, leading to forms of dependency in the education sector. To reinforce the point about recruitment and residential status, the China Teacher Development Foundation

³³ Bodenhorn 2020, 984.

³⁴ The challenge of personnel recruitment is widespread in China. New streamlining measures announced by Premier Li Keqiang in 2013 restricted the ability of associations to hire staff with permanent positions. New permanent positions can only be advertised when a staff member retires, creating an age imbalance and a barrier to entry for new talent. Interview, China Association of Higher Education, 22 June 2018.

claimed to have hired someone on a permanent contract in 2003 but then was unable to do so again until 2016, meaning that it had to rely on temporary positions with limited appeal.³⁵ Affiliated associations are struggling to manage the commodification and casualization of workers, in line with patterns of “durable subordination” in China’s contemporary labour regime.³⁶

Prevailing modes of personnel management create opportunities and contingencies for affiliated associations.³⁷ For instance, having control over the assessment of cadres at departmental level (*chujī* 处级) creates a type of constrained autonomy for associations.³⁸ The current performance evaluation system in China seeks compliance with Party discipline and political imperatives, meaning that association staff “should not make mistakes,” which is a euphemism for political correctness rather than a measure of work performance, leading to the maxim: “as long as you don’t make mistakes, you can carry on with your job.”³⁹ The Ministry of Education evaluates the performance of association leaders based on subjective measures of loyalty, capability, work rate, work achievements and the rather ambiguous indicator of self-discipline.⁴⁰ From our observations, affiliated associations prioritize a strategy of blame avoidance and are careful when claiming credit for positive policy outcomes. It follows that politically correct affiliated associations can carry out their business as education influencers and service providers with relative autonomy. Affiliates enjoy considerable leeway in their operations but remain wary of political correctness and moral injunctions.

Autonomy results from the government’s lack of involvement in managing personnel below departmental level and those without formal established positions. Affiliated associations can employ and manage staff and part-time workers through volunteer recruitment or work placement schemes as needed. They are responsible for evaluating personnel at and below departmental level, allowing some flexibility. In the case of the China Education Development Foundation, all cadres above department level are transferred from the ministries of Finance and Education, whereas non-permanent staff positions are filled without ministerial oversight. Flexible personnel management and financing allow affiliated associations to operate differently than their departmental counterparts, who are locked in a strict bureaucratic hierarchy.⁴¹ Affiliates provide professional services, advise social organizations and entrepreneurs about education-related affairs, manage high-profile projects such as the establishment of an e-learning platform across 15 provinces, and oversee the provision of subsidies and tutoring for disadvantaged students.⁴²

Relations between government and affiliates are premised on control but show signs of adaptive cooperation. In the education sector, government intervention occurs at high levels and only when

35 Interview, China Teacher Development Foundation, 26 June 2018.

36 Lee 2012.

37 Wang and Song 2013.

38 The Chinese administrative hierarchy starts at the top national level (*zhengfa guoji*) in Beijing, followed by the provincial level (*zhengfa shengbujī*) including all the ministers of the State Council and provincial governors, the prefectural level (*zhengfa ditingjī*) including city mayors, the departmental level (*zhengfa chujī*) and, finally, the sectional level (*zhengfa keji*).

39 Political correctness is embedded in the working culture of most Chinese organizations. Some of the indicators of political correctness noted by the authors appear in the 2017 year-end reports submitted by the six education-affiliated associations to the ministry. The reports suggest that affiliated associations demonstrate their requisite loyalty and correctness in a procedural manner, with lists of annual pro-CCP “Party-building” activities, efforts to learn and understand Xi Jinping’s speeches and time spent studying the latest CCP National Congress reports. It is difficult to determine how much of this activity is performative, superficial or genuine. Interview, China Association of Higher Education, 22 June 2018.

40 Performance management includes efforts to supervise affiliated associations, where inspections and audits can be used to enforce Party ideology and discipline, although this is more flexible than the performance management system used in government departments. Interview, personnel department, Ministry of Education, 4 June 2018. Corroboration from an interview with the Inspection Office, Ministry of Education, 12 September 2021.

41 Interview, China Education Development Foundation, 26 June 2018.

42 Interview, China Education Development Foundation, 28 March 2022.

there are political issues arising from the behaviour of affiliated associations, leaving associations with scales of autonomy over personnel and daily decision making.

Finance and Resource Distribution

Levels of access to finance, resources and projects are determined by relations between affiliated associations and their government sponsors and patrons. When the education department establishes and takes joint responsibility for affiliated associations in its sector, associations with well-connected leaders, powerful networks and trusted records have higher levels of resource transfer and developmental space within which to operate. This holds true for those affiliates whose status and remit have been transferred from another department. Irregularities are known to occur during this transfer process, however, meaning that the status of associations is sometimes in doubt. For example, there are claims that the Ministry of Education failed to register at least one new association with the State Commission Office of Public Sector Reform, failing to get the required Organization Certificate Code and leaving the association without any legal status or identity.⁴³

Affiliated associations receive financial support from the government in their start-up period when the government provides financial subsidies, project funding and other resources. For example, the start-up capital for the China Education Development Foundation came from the government, and the government's purchasing service is still an important source of funding.⁴⁴ Government subsidies are usually cut each year, but funding available through competitive contracts for services increases.⁴⁵ When government subsidies decline, associations come under pressure to generate revenue from projects with private or state-owned enterprises and individuals.⁴⁶

Associations are dependent on government funding, although some have blended financial strategies that include individual and corporate donations and membership fees. Even with degrees of financial and operational autonomy, associations ultimately derive their legitimacy and influence from their government affiliations. Taking the Sports Federation as an example, although its income derives mainly from advertising and sponsorship, the secretary general claimed in an interview that if the association was not affiliated with the Ministry of Education it would encounter major difficulties.⁴⁷ The secretary general explained that even "hosting an athletic contest is a very long process, from applying to organizing the event."⁴⁸ The association needs to apply for a venue to host the sports event in a university, middle or primary school, and must secure permission from the public security department, fire protection department, hygiene department and others. Given the liabilities of holding student sports events, the government has a complicated approval process. Mutual trust between the government and affiliated associations based on political loyalty and performance indicators can help to expedite approval processes for contracted services and events, and agreements can sometimes be reached informally without cumbersome administrative processes.

43 Interview, Sports Federation, 25 June 2018.

44 Interview, China Education Development Foundation, 26 June 2018.

45 According to the Annual Audit Report of the China Education Development Foundation, it received nearly 2 billion yuan in government subsidies in 2016 and 2017, and around 778 million yuan in 2015. Figures retrieved from the China Education Development Foundation website, <https://www.cedf.org.cn/cedf/xxgk/ndsjbjg>. According to the Annual Audit Report of the China Teacher Development Foundation, in 2017 it received nearly 2 million yuan of government subsidies, accounting for 2.8% of its annual income, compared with 1.5 million yuan (3.5%) in 2016 and 1.6 million yuan in 2015 (6.4%). Figures retrieved from the China Teacher Development Foundation website, <http://www.jsjjh.org.cn/jsjjh/xxgk/>.

46 This pressure to generate business is also an opportunity for affiliated associations to gain some discretionary authority, and the trend is for associations to organize training activities and competitions in the education sector. According to sources, the work undertaken by associations far exceeds the responsibilities stipulated by the government. Interview, China Association of Higher Education, 22 June 2018. Corroboration from an interview with the department of college student affairs, Ministry of Education, 21 June 2018.

47 Interview, Sports Federation, 25 June 2018.

48 Ibid.

The relative dependence on government funding may be less important than political access and connections. One association claims that “we do not need a penny from the government, but we cannot lose the legitimacy of having an affiliation with the government.”⁴⁹ When associations have a recognized identity as a trusted affiliate, they can claim political support from the government, after which financial benefits will become available to them by virtue of their status first as recipients of subsidies and then as genuine bidders for competitive contracts to provide services. For example, the China Education Association for International Exchange carries out educational exchange and partnership programmes with relevant counterparts in foreign countries. In recognition of its achievements in the development of new education links, the association was granted additional functions in 2014 including the recruitment of foreign teachers, nongovernmental education exchange activities involving Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, the management of intermediary organizations (*zhongjie zuzhi* 中介组织) for studying abroad and conducting quality assurance certification for transnational higher education initiatives and collaborative provision.⁵⁰

Education associations are competing for contracts in a crowded marketplace. The secretary general of the Chinese Society of Education worries that “the government is becoming less dependent on us, and we are doing less for the government.”⁵¹ Founded in April 1979 under a different name by the State Council and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, this association was strategically positioned to offer evidence-based analysis and advice to the Ministry of Education. The association employed experts in education and enjoyed a strong reputation because its research informed important ministerial decisions. By the 1990s, there were more affiliated associations in education and the government grew less reliant on the Chinese Society of Education. According to the current secretary general, the arrival of newcomers in the education sector creates competition and overlap, with associations offering a range of services such as curriculum and textbook research and equipment procurement.⁵² In recent years, these new associations have grown stronger, with mostly full-time staff, while the Chinese Society of Education has mostly part-time experts, which may explain why business is gradually decreasing.⁵³

In the context of the 2013 government policy “streamlining administration and delegating power to the lower levels, tightening regulation, and optimizing public services” (*jian zheng fangquan* 简政放权), more administrative functions are being transferred to affiliated associations. This transfer is not always systematic or well-planned, however, leading to policy incoherence and unstable relations. The Ministry of Education may, for instance, “transfer one function to you today and then another one tomorrow, while telling you that there is a meeting required but you have to organize it without any funding.”⁵⁴ Some projects undertaken by affiliated associations in education have been approved under a fund-matching model, but the government has subsequently failed to pay its share because of apparent budgetary constraints.⁵⁵

49 Interview, Sports Federation, 25 June 2018.

50 Report from the China Education Association for International Exchange, June 2018.

51 Interview, Chinese Society of Education, 22 June 2018.

52 Competition in China’s crowded education sector includes inter-association competition as well as competition between affiliated associations and public bodies such as the National Centre for Education Development Research run by the Ministry of Education. Each group is expected to study strategic issues in the education sector, which has policy implications. Interview, Chinese Society of Education, 22 June 2018.

53 The Chinese Society of Education has maintained nine permanent positions since 2000 and this already small group of experts often conducts business on behalf of other associations and government departments. Interview, Chinese Society of Education, 22 June 2018.

54 Irregularities in relations between affiliates and the government are widespread. Affiliated associations often function as government assistants, without clearly defined contractual obligations. The implication is that when the government needs to improvise, it can make use of affiliates and mobilize resources, but this flexibility also means that affiliates can dissociate themselves from the government and can be difficult to supervise. Interview, Chinese Society of Education, 22 June 2018. Corroboration from an interview with the General Office, Ministry of Education, 22 June 2018.

55 Interview, China Association of Higher Education, 22 June 2018.

Carrying out occasional projects without supporting funds is manageable for associations with large volumes of business and multiple sources of funds. Well-established affiliated associations need to undertake government projects to maintain their standing and strengthen relations with the government, but they worry about projects over the long term without supportive funding and permanent positions for staff, leading to aspirations to separate entirely from the government to become genuinely autonomous private organizations.⁵⁶ Funding irregularities, policy incoherence and political interference are some of the factors that explain the desire of associations to balance their dependence on government departments. As middle-ground intermediaries, affiliates undertake functions directly transferred to them by the government, provide services purchased by the government, run national education competitions and events, and develop their own business ventures. For example, one affiliated association runs its own training centre, publishes a magazine and has set up a limited company selling teaching equipment.⁵⁷

Associations need to balance funding and responsibilities; when this balance breaks down, they may grow weary of cumbersome state control and agitate for greater autonomy. Our view is that affiliated associations adopt a form of ceremonial performative politics and passive compliance to show their political loyalty to the CCP. Through symbolic political correctness, it is more likely that affiliated associations can avoid working in full accordance with the educational requirements and preferences of the government. Unlike the state corporatism model, the changing relationship between the government and affiliated associations resembles a process of “integration before differentiation.”⁵⁸ The government establishes affiliated associations to fill gaps in public services and mobilize social resources. When associations improve their reputations and track records, a relational adjustment occurs, largely driven by associations’ desire to obtain professional autonomy and avoid government intervention and the government’s desire to reduce expenditure.

Projects and Business Operations

Affiliated associations are positioned to carry out tasks and respond to social needs that the government is unwilling or unable to fulfil. Government departments prefer headline grabbing initiatives that are easier to accomplish, less likely to cause mistakes and more likely to deliver clear results. Initiatives that are expensive, lengthy and do not have much short-term impact are less attractive for the government, so there is an opportunity for affiliated associations to take on additional work and broaden their portfolios. For example, the central government strongly advocates the development of football in China, but this requires integrated planning and lengthy timescales. An association proposed building 40,000 football schools across the country; however, the situation requires more than infrastructure as there are shortages of teachers and coaches, so the schools also carry out training and capacity building.⁵⁹

Affiliated associations have an advantage in integrating resources and reaching consensus on public interest issues as well as providing assistance to groups with special needs or interests that are invisible to or neglected by the government. Affiliates in the education sector have the flexibility to integrate resources from different ministries – for instance, the China Education Development Foundation receives financial support from both the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of

56 The roles of affiliates more often evolve into a situation of passive autonomy, where their experts can ignore orders or requests from government departments in the Ministry of Education and pursue their own agenda or change the terms of their service to specific departments. Interview, China Association of Higher Education, 22 June 2018. Corroboration from an interview with the Inspection Office, Ministry of Education, 12 September 2021.

57 Interview, China Association of Higher Education, 14 February 2022. The authors note that the Chinese Society of Education also publishes a journal and runs a limited company providing services such as technology, consultancy and advertising, while the Sports Federation publishes two of its own magazines.

58 Fan and Cheng 2007.

59 Interview, China Teacher Development Foundation, 26 June 2018.

Education and uses connections with enterprises and individuals to fill gaps in its operating budget.⁶⁰ Affiliates generally have the advantage of their own credibility, official backing and track record in service delivery. For example, one affiliated association supports teachers from remote areas using its own resources, and subsidizes students from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan because this is politically inconvenient for the government.⁶¹

In China's complex and competitive bureaucratic landscape, affiliated associations in the education sector manage projects and provide services. The first type of association business is administrative – the formal functions transferred by government to associations where it is recognized that associations are well-equipped to meet industry standards and deliver quality public services.⁶² The second type is political business, where associations help the government to accomplish political tasks that “must be completed but are inconvenient for the government or may damage the government's image.”⁶³ Important political tasks outsourced to associations include “safeguarding stability through education,”⁶⁴ managing specific diplomatic affairs⁶⁵ and general business related to the national interest and the Party's image. By this logic, politically compliant affiliated associations are protected by the “imperial sword” (*shangfang baojian* 尚方宝剑) of the Party and enjoy a steady, well-funded workload. Associations tasked primarily with administrative work, with only subsidiary involvement in CCP affairs, tend to be more precarious and exposed to competition.

Business relations can foster varying degrees of autonomy and reputational gains for government-affiliated associations in the education sector. There are formal needs that fit within standard contractual arrangements with the government and improvised needs that arise in response to social demands that have not been met or perhaps even fully identified by the government. When affiliated associations identify a gap in public service, there is an opportunity to respond quickly and operate with relative autonomy from government oversight. Well-managed associations can take advantage of their positions and specific resources to serve the public and meet social needs. This is beneficial for an autocratic government that relies on performance legitimacy, although credit sharing can create tensions.

Government sponsors and initiators of associations are normally from high-ranking administrative levels and possess considerable resources that can be used to expand the remit and operational space available to affiliated associations. In most instances, the appointed heads of affiliated associations have administrative experience and seek to maintain personal connections with their networks in government. For example, Yuan Guiren 袁贵仁, president of the council of the China Education Development Foundation, served as a conservative minister of education from 2009 to 2016. The heads of the other affiliated associations include retired officials from the Ministry of Education at the level of deputy minister or above. A strong organizational relationship means that once

60 Interview, Inspection Office, Ministry of Education, 12 September 2021.

61 Interview, China Education Development Foundation, 26 June 2018.

62 Interview, Chinese Society of Education, 20 June 2018.

63 Tasks with reputational implications that are delegated to affiliated associations include arrangements for physical education teachers and football coaches to study and gain training in Europe and North America, and the allocation of education funds and technologies to impoverished localities and ethnically autonomous regions. Interview, China Education Association for International Exchange, 21 June 2018. Corroboration from the 2017 year-end reports of two affiliated associations.

64 Stability is vague but can apply, for instance, to an affiliated association stopping teachers from petitioning by offering them pay-outs and financial incentives. Teachers without permanent status (*wubianzhi jiaoshi*) cannot get support from the government when they retire, so teachers all over the country have become disruptive petitioners, agitating for subsidies and fairer treatment. Considering the government's budget shortfalls for these teachers, affiliated associations provide support for the teachers in order to stop them petitioning, with pay-outs of 10,000 yuan annually per person. Interview, China Education Development Foundation, 26 June 2018.

65 Affiliated associations are sometimes called upon to help the government deal with complicated affairs, for example when there are budgetary constraints or when the government is reluctant to be seen to be intervening. One example is a request for an affiliated association to help the government provide living expenses for the children of foreign leaders to study in China. Interview, China Education Association for International Exchange, 21 June 2018.

the affiliated association is founded, it forms a pragmatic cooperative relationship with the government, qualifying for tax exemptions and funding in return for specific administrative and political services.⁶⁶

Two general trends characterize the business development of associations that are affiliated with the Ministry of Education. The first is an upward trend, when business grows for well-funded and trusted associations that have multiple sources of income such as government service contracts, private revenues, donations and contributions, membership fees and interest from savings. Revenue from completed projects allows associations to develop their profiles and reputations and gain public recognition. The China Education Development Foundation stated that “as long as the project is related to education, we can participate in it.”⁶⁷ The second is a downward trend that occurs when associations with narrow sources of government funding face annual budget cuts and cannot find alternative income streams. When associations lack access to resources, they rely more on the government’s fiscal appropriation and purchasing of services and risk losing ground to more dynamic associations that have multiple sources of revenue.

Each affiliated association has specific functions endowed by the government when it is established, but the scope of its business undertakings is ambiguously expressed, so there are overlapping responsibilities and agendas for associations vying for Ministry of Education projects and private contracts. For example, the China Education Development Foundation supports students from poor families in mainland China as well as students from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan who face difficulties while studying in mainland China. The foundation works in underdeveloped areas, where access to education remains a problem, and supports students, teachers and organizations that have made special contributions to the development of education in China.⁶⁸ When developing STEM subjects, educational culture, sports and other national educational activities, there is considerable overlap with the functions of the similarly named but much smaller China Teacher Development Foundation. This association has a mandate to provide specialist teacher training, scientific research and lectures to improve national teaching standards, support teachers with special difficulties and reward teaching excellence.

Many of China’s less developed rural areas and third-tier cities face shortages of well-trained teachers. The China Teacher Development Foundation found that retired officials with ministerial experience in Beijing have considerable knowledge and experience that is underutilized. It drew up a proposal to enlist locally based retirees, many of whom are in their 60s (the silver age), in rural poverty alleviation programmes.⁶⁹ The strengthening of links between government and society at the subnational level through educational platforms is one example of the innovative autonomous behaviour of affiliated associations that are strategically positioned to respond to social needs. Talent-capture programmes are beneficial for rural constituencies and the government, although questions arise as to who gets recognition and takes credit for the success of these programmes.

The experience of affiliated associations suggests that state control does not always operate consistently or coherently. Even under tight supervision, associations’ scope for business and operations is broad. Associations specializing in education services often coordinate with associations linked to other government departments such as the China Youth Development Foundation, the China Children and Teenagers’ Foundation, the China Women and Children’s Foundation, the China Charity Federation and the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation.⁷⁰ Led by former ministers and deputy ministers with the same types of networks within the Ministry of Education, associations face considerable competition when serving the same constituencies in the same sector.

66 Interview, China Education Development Foundation, 26 June 2018.

67 Ibid.

68 Report from the China Education Development Foundation, June 2018.

69 Interview, China Teacher Development Foundation, 26 June 2018.

70 Ibid.

Conclusion

State control is not absolute in China's fragmented authoritarian system. This article contends that in some cases involving the education sector, the appearance of state control creates room for autonomy even among the associations that are closest to the state. The government uses the most cost effective and labour-saving method to control affiliated associations – for instance, by appointing or approving of association leaders. The establishment of affiliates, and the commissioning of work from these associations, is an admission that the government is unable or unwilling to provide specific public services or be seen to be intervening in politically contentious affairs, so periodically the government relies on affiliated associations to resolve important matters, creating forms of co-dependence and raising questions about reputation and performance recognition. State control and autonomy are best seen as a trade-off, with a multitude of potential risks and benefits for the government and its affiliated associations in what can be described as an adaptive cooperative model.

In a performance-based autocratic system with tight government control, affiliated associations can maintain degrees of passive autonomy without being in opposition to the state. Our data show that government control manifests differently in different affiliated associations based on key factors such as personnel management, finance and resource distribution and business operations.

During interviews from 2018 to 2022 with all six affiliated associations of the Chinese Ministry of Education, we found similar patterns of control but divergent experiences and outcomes within associations. Education-linked associations are established for similar purposes and managed by the same standards, although they receive variable amounts of funding and projects from the government. It is significant that affiliated associations experience novel forms of autonomy in different degrees as they develop and carry out their activities over time. Affiliated associations in the education sector are dependent in many ways on the state, but there is duplicity in the relationship. The appearance of dependence may work in an association's favour, and our findings suggest that there is a strategy whereby associations pursue resources either to protect themselves in an authoritarian context or to gain further incorporation into government affairs through the effective provision of key services. Affiliated associations are completing governmental tasks and taking the initiative to find gaps in public service, which is ultimately regime-enhancing behaviour, while also taking measured credit for their achievements and striving for nuanced forms of autonomy either out of a sense of public duty or private ambition.

We confirm the general proposition that government-led NGOs, or affiliated associations in our case, build alliances with the state to secure material resources and shape policy agendas, usually with unbalanced reciprocity, while gradually securing forms of autonomy. The prescriptive necessities that accompany the role of affiliated associations set the parameters for their relations with the state, but these continuously evolve. As a novel type of government-led NGO, affiliated associations in education have de facto autonomy, which emerges from their relations with various professional management units, the gradual acquisition of multiple sources of financing and diverse networks of support. Affiliated associations intermediate between state and society, advancing government agendas, integrating resources from different ministries and contributing to the dynamic delivery of public services in a complex, ever-changing authoritarian system.

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