Centralising, decentralising, and recentralising: A case study of the university-government relationship in Taiwan

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The role of the state has always been a salient feature of higher education governance in Confucian societies. This is despite that their modern higher education systems have been built upon Western experiences. This article examines the role of the state in invigorating universities in Taiwan in their quest for world-class status. It interrogates university-government relationship in the society with a particular focus on how the premier universities work with the government and how the government maintains its influence through a system of checks and balances. Adopting a case study research approach, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with administrators and academics at a flagship university and with government officials who are closely associated with the higher education sector. We find that the role of the state remains prominent with decentralised approaches and recentralised government control. This study finally challenges some conventional presumptions about higher education governance in Taiwan.

Keyword: Taiwan, higher education, governance, cultural perspective, university-government relationship

Introduction

The history of Taiwan's higher education began nine decades ago, with the first university established in 1928 during Japanese colonisation. The Japanese system of education was replaced by modern Chinese model under a prototype of American higher education after World War II. Taiwan's higher education system entered into another reform era after the Kuomintang Party retreated to Taiwan in 1949. Education and propaganda were used to promote Chinese nationalism, while higher education institutions were under strict control by the government. The cabinet-level Ministry of Education (MOE) dominated almost every aspect of higher education institutions from tuition fee, course offering, student quota to the appointment of university's president (Tsai, 2015). After the termination of martial law in 1987, Taiwan's higher education system moved towards pursuing academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Since 1995, the higher education sector has been seen as free from political constraints (Chan & Chan, 2015). Having provided Taiwanese academics and universities with a certain degree of academic freedom at the system level (Chan, 2010), such governance and reforms (Hayhoe, 2015) have played a crucial role in Taiwan's recent higher education development. The relationship between universities and government has been repeatedly revisited and redefined while universities are granted with increasingly decision-making right and autonomy (Chan, 2010; Tsai, 2015).

Existing research on higher education has focused overwhelmingly on the political and economic functioning in the society and is based primarily on the theorization in the West,

while the much-needed cultural perspective has been insufficiently examined (Yang, 2017). Taiwan is no exception. However, Taiwanese scholars have constantly touched on the cultural aspect of higher education often implicitly. Sung and Tai (2007) examined how Taiwan responded to globalisation to quest world-class status. Hou (2011) expressed her concerns that international accreditation may become 'cultural imperialism' in academia when the American Anglo-Saxon accreditation standards and practices are adopted in the Taiwanese context. Chou and Chiu (2013) assessed the counteractive impact of imposing the policy to quantitatively evaluate the productivity of academics using international indices resulting at the expense of social equity and cultural heritage. Tsai (2015) discussed how deregulation in Taiwan higher education as a result of political liberalisation had led to a larger degree of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Recently, Chan and Yang (2017) explicitly employ a cultural perspective to observe Taiwan's higher education development. They propose a 'hybrid' university model that integrates the Western academic system with Confucian values (Chan, Lee, & Yang, 2017).

A university-government relationship is the most crucial characteristic of higher education systems justifying the success of their development. Precisely, the issue of the university-government relationship lies behind the reasons for many non-Western societies to fail to achieve much in their higher education development. In recent years, an impressive rise of higher education institutions in East Asia has drawn much attention from world scholars to understand the generative mechanisms of their success. Taiwan's higher education system has progressed remarkably over the past years. As a non-Western society with a considerably large degree of democracy in comparison with other Sinic counterparts (Cheng, 2017), its higher education development has been included in the Confucian-influenced societies with an invigorating role from the nation-state and close supervision toward educational agendas (Marginson, 2011).

To further theorise university-government relationship in Taiwan, this study aims to address the gap by applying a cultural perspective to examining the role of the government in invigorating universities in Taiwan in their quest for world-class status. The research questions are (1) What is the role of the government in supporting Taiwan's premier universities to achieve their world-class status? and (2) How do these universities work with the government to raise their global profiles while serving local needs? Through answering the questions, the study contributes to a better understanding of some key opportunities and issues at a systemic level for the future direction of Taiwan's higher education after a successful process of its development in the past years.

A cultural perspective

This study is based on the literature that examines university-government relationship from a cultural perspective and sees the association of institutions and government as an organic interconnectedness that shapes the culture of the existing system. Through the process of cultural assimilation and collision between indigenous and external values, the relationship has spontaneously maintained a balance among its parts (Gardner, 2014).

Higher education systems in Asia share two commonalities: the foreign Western origin of their university models and the process of indigenisation (Altbach, 1989). They have undergone a painstaking process of integrating Western university models with their traditional values. Efforts have been made to examine such a profoundly difficult cultural experience in all East Asian societies that share many common heritages especially

Confucianism. Oxford-based Simon Marginson (2011) has observed Confucian influence in higher education in Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam. According to him, these societies exhibit a special developmental dynamism and have created a distinctive model of higher education development which is even more effective in some aspects than the existing modern university models that have long been incubated in the Western world. These societies have all been shaped by a Confucian family commitment to education. They benefit from a strong and effective government system that invests heavily on education and research (Marginson, 2015). He describes higher education in these societies as self-formation and refers to the development as two different ways of learning that coincide at their endpoint (Marginson, 2017).

Taking a similar approach, Boston-based Philip Altbach (1989) views the phenomena differently. He first coined the term *twisted roots* to describe the difficult cultural conditions of higher education development in East Asian societies, where the dominant Western academic models have been twisted out of shape by lingering and strong traditional East Asian values. He illustrates the incompatibility between the Western culture that underlies the functioning of modern universities and their indigenous values that are deeply embedded in the societies. In recent years, Altbach (2016) has presented a notion of *glass ceiling* using China as an example. He argues that China's impressive rise of higher education institutions in some of the global rankings over the past decades may soon experience the conditions that inhibit them to reach the top and their full potential for excellence in research and teaching. Furthermore, he refers to China's higher education system as *feet of clay* with a great mismatch between a few premier universities heavily funded by the government and a large number of under-funded higher education institutions.

Within the region, Hong Kong-based Rui Yang (2016b) resonates the challenges faced by East Asian higher education especially by its toxic academic culture that leads to distortions and inefficiency on the institutional and systemic levels. He emphasises the strikingly different cultural roots and heritages that have led to continuous conflicts between the imposed Western higher education values and the indigenous ones of East Asia which impact negatively on the quality, efficiency and effectiveness in operation (Yang, 2016a). Yet, such a situation could change. The cultural complexities and contradictions between grafted models and longstanding indigenous values are likely to be resolved, due to the flexible and open perspective of East Asian people. Such a cultural thinking mode allows them to appreciate opposing poles as a driving force and see opportunities in contradictions (Yang, 2017).

Method

This qualitative research applies constructionism as its epistemological underpinnings (Crotty, 2015). It is an empirical investigation that seeks to understand the relationship between universities and the government in Taiwan. First, it adopts symbolic interactionism approach with a case study design (Crotty, 2015). The purposive case (Punch, 2009) is a national flagship research university in Taiwan, contributing to the society's cultural, technological and social development and linked to global intellectual and scientific trends (Altbach, 2011). It aspires to attain world-class status and embrace international norms. The intensity of convergence and divergence in policies and practices emerged from university-government relationship can be observed through its adaptation, imitation, and transformation to conform with the Western model in order to enhance its global presence. By employing a case study research, this study examines the administrators and academics' views concerning how premier universities work with the government in pursuing world-class status. The case

university is named University A in this study.

Next, this study explores how the government supports and supervises the universities from a policymaker's perspectives. Believing that policy represents the values of the interest group that possesses the authority in policy-making (Ball, 1990), it examines the values and assumptions that underlie the policy for world-class universities (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). Initial contacts were made for selected interviewees and snowball samplings (Punch, 2009) were conducted afterward by enquiring participants to identify other key participants. There were thirteen participants from the case university including the president, senior executives, and administrators working in international programs or international affairs and nine policymakers who have been associated with Taiwan's higher education such as those in Ministry of Education (MOE), HEEACT (Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan), TWAEA (Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association), FICHET (Foundation of International Cooperation in Higher Education of Taiwan) and other relevant units (see Table 1 and 2).

In-depth semi-structured interviews with a prepared list of questions were employed as the main method of data collection. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin or English depending on the participants' choice and lasted for 60-90 minutes. With consent from the interviewees, all interviews were recorded and transcribed afterward. The interview data were triangulated with available documents concerning university-government relationship. The written institutional and government policy documents on the development of higher education system including a push towards world-class universities were reviewed. Drawn from the case university, the documents include vision and mission statements, strategic plans and leaders' speeches. The government-related documents encompass fiscal government budget schemes, *University Act*, accreditation policies, education reform-related documents, *the constitution of the Republic of China*, and other budgetary plans concerning the development of Taiwan's higher education.

QRS International NVivo software was used to manage interview data and review transcripts to identify emerging themes that guided subsequent data collection and coding in an iterative process. Constant comparison, comprehensive data treatment, and deviant-case analysis were conducted for data reliability (Silverman, 2017). Two main strategies to increase the rigor of data analysis were developing a coding system and conducting triangulation (Morse, 2015). Two coders met frequently to ensure that the meaning of the analysis was consistent. The interview data were annotated and coded (see Appendix 1) with the aim of searching for aggregated themes (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Coding concentrated on a descriptive approach in which codes as words or short phrases were assigned to data. This process eventually formed an inventory of topics for categorizing (Miles, Huberman, & Sladana, 2014). Simultaneously, documents were reviewed and cross-referenced. In the process, data collected from the participants of University A and policymakers were regularly triangulated with reviewed documents (see Appendix 2). Through qualitative data analysis software, the interview data were weaved together and synthesised with documentary data and related-literature from books and journal articles (Richards, 1999).

[Table 1 near here]

[Table 2 near here]

Findings

Adopting a cultural perspective and based on empirical data, this study examines both the coordination and tensions spawned within the relations between universities and the government from the views of academics and government-associated officials. We interpret the university-government relationship in Taiwan along two major themes: the role of the government and institutional autonomy. An overview of the data structure with representative quotations is presented in Appendix 1.

Role of the government

The recent rise of Sinic higher education systems is believed to stem from the common cultural roots shaped by their deep Confucian traditions (Marginson, 2011, 2015). Despite the changes and external influences to adopt modern university models that have been patterned after Western experiences, the core of Chinese cultural values has remained strong in these Sinic societies. Therefore, one senior scholar majored in history described Taiwan's cultural advantages in comparison with the Chinese mainland as that Taiwan did not have the Cultural Revolution, and that there had been little disruption of its cultural development (UA-08).

Decentralised approaches with recentralised government control

Taiwan's society has undergone decentralisation since the revocation of martial law in the late 1980s. Acknowledging that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are essential for higher education development (Davies, 2015), the government stipulated the *University Act* in 1994 (Ministry of Education, 2017a). A series of education reforms that promote deregulation, university-based management, diversification of education provision, autonomy of teaching profession and administration were subsequently implemented (Mok, 2000, 2010). With the further amendment of the Act in 2013, universities have been given more autonomy in selecting their presidents. In the interviews, most participants proudly attested this self-governance measure as a significant milestone demonstrating how the system has been reinforced to embrace Western academic values. The President of University A who was the first to be elected under this amended law remarked: 'Things have changed. We all think that we should fully respect the university's search committee. Academics manage a university. We are the first one' (UA-02). One mid-rank official in Higher Education Department shared her view that institutional autonomy is an essential part of the *University Act* and the government complies with this act in governing the universities. Only in certain areas such as enrolment and teacher employment require the Ministry of Education to set some basic regulations (PM-01). Against such view, a senior official indicated that the complexity of the system pushes the Ministry of Education to regulate universities.

> Behind the Ministry of Education, there is the Legislative Yuan that holds even larger power to review the budget. So, when the legislators are concerned with some educational policies, they will require the Ministry of Education to manage, supervise or even regulate universities. We have no choice but to monitor universities (PM-06).

Based on the *Constitution of the Republic of China* adopted since 1947, five major branches of government (i.e. Executive Yuan, Legislative Yuan, Judicial Yuan, Examination Yuan, and Control Yuan), have been designed to distribute the state's power so that one branch's authority can be counterbalanced with other associated branches. Although the

Ministry of Education is under the Executive Yuan, the fiscal budget allocation proposed by the Ministry of Education is subject to the review of the Legislative Yuan.

Despite a number of decentralised attempts since the late 1990s, the state still takes much control over the system. Currently, the government has directed the system to strictly follow its path (PM-03, PM-08). Along with the funding schemes offered, detailed matrices and key performance indices have been set to tie the universities up (UA-08). An advisor of the Ministry of Education suggested that this current micromanagement and control should be replaced by the practices with centralised national goals yet decentralised implementation process (PM-08).

Carrot and stick: Funding and Monitoring

The central government plays a significant role to financially support the development of Taiwan's higher education. In the fiscal year 2017, it allocated 12.2 percent (NTD 243.3 billion) of the national budget to the Ministry of Education in which 41.07 percent (NTD 99.9 billion) was set apart to support higher education development (Executive Yuan, 2017). The allocated amount counts the second after the Department of Homeland Security (16.1 percent). Generally, national universities receive 30-40 percent of their annual budget from the government while private universities receive 10-15 percent (PM-03). An official of the Ministry of Education presented her view.

> In practice, the Ministry of Education still owns the budgetary power. Well, if universities want to have the funding, they have to take it. They have to show us the evaluation outcomes. Indeed, because of this relationship, our institutional autonomy is quite different from that of the West (PM-01).

The senior official explained: 'Each plays different roles. For some, they have their mission to bring in national reputation. For others, they have their responsibilities to teach the young generation' (PM-06). Consistently, an experienced official affirmed: 'The government provided different funds, different assigned tasks and expected that we all will do our best for the society as a whole' (PM-04).

Based on the Macro Planning Committee established under the Executive Yuan in 2002, Taiwan's higher education institutions are classified into four types: research, teaching, professional and community on the basis of their missions and responsibilities (Yang, 2006). The funding schemes allocated to universities have also been classified accordingly. Under the former Kuomintang Party government, the policy was geared towards research, infrastructure, and resources to support research and development (PM-02). There were two continuous financial phases to support research universities: *Plan to Develop First-Class Universities and Top Research Center* (2006-2010) of NTD 50 billion for 12 universities in 2006-2007 and 11 universities in 2008- 2010 (Chen et al., 2011) and *Aim for Top University Plan* (2011-2015) with 5 years of NTD10 billion per year for 12 universities (Ministry of Education, 2010). These two plans aimed to uphold academic excellence and to improve international competitiveness and visibility of Taiwan's universities (Chou & Chiu, 2013). In parallel, the *Program for Teaching Excellence Universities* was launched in 2005-2017 with the total funding of NTD 21.87 billion (Ministry of Education, 2017c). It was a significant project initiated by the Ministry of Education to substantialise teaching quality in higher education. Across thirteen years, forty-eight universities were granted this fund.

Under the current Democratic Progressive Party government, the policy has been amended to diversely support teaching-related affairs, social responsibilities, and resources for disadvantaged and vocational students (PM-02). The most recent five years initiatives entitled *Higher Education Sprout Project* has been launched in 2017 with the funding of NTD 86.8 billion in total or NTD 17.37 billion per year (Chan & Yang, 2017) under three major goals: (1) to comprehensively improve the quality and to promote a diversification of higher education institutions of NTD 8.8 billion, (2) to assist research universities and research centers to quest world-class status of NTD 6 billion (4 billion for 4 flagship universities and 2 billion for research centers) and (3) to promote social responsibilities and support disadvantaged and vocational students of NTD 2.57 billion (Ministry of Education, 2018). Among the total of 157 higher education institutions in Taiwan (Ministry of Education, 2017b), seventy-one universities and eighty-five technical colleges received the supports through this funding scheme in the first fiscal year.

Given the changes of the ruling party from the Kuomintang Party to the Democratic Progressive Party, the government strategies have shifted the relative concentration from promoting *excellence* to ensuring *equity* (PM-02, PM-03, UA-03, UA-04, UA-08). A number of participants expressed their concerns that putting equity over excellence would harm the development of higher education in the long run (PM-05, UA-03, UA-06). For instance, the funding from the *Higher Education Sprout Project* allocated to University A has been reduced by approximately 40 percent from NTD 3 billion to NTD 1.8 billion in comparison to the previous plan (PM-05). However, an experienced policymaker agreed that the funding to promote research excellence has been deductively given to four flagship universities instead of twelve universities as allocated in the previous plan: 'We don't need that many world-class universities. Only four is enough. The rest can concentrate on their specialties, teaching and social responsibilities' (PM-03).

Principal-agent model as a substitute of control

To develop a mechanism of quality assurance, Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT) was jointly established by the Ministry of Education and all higher education institutions in Taiwan in 2005. HEEACT adopted the American accreditation model (Hou, 2011). Initially, some were concerned with the potential compromise of institutional autonomy and academic freedom under HEEACT's close association with the Ministry of Education. Head of HEEACT shared experiences: 'We try our best to achieve professionalism, independence, and internationalisation. We are not under MOE yet one-third of our Board of Trustees are assigned by the government and 99 percent of our funding is from the government' (PM-02). The participant also described that when there is a major change of the government policies, HEEACT would professionally amend their accreditation criteria to be consistent with the government direction. Given the focus on equity set by the current government, HEEACT has accordingly strengthened some evaluation criteria such as student financial aids, communication with stakeholders and stakeholder's engagement in university governance (PM-02). While HEEACT accommodates the government policies, it insists on its independence in the accreditation process (PM-03).

Formerly, the HEEACT accreditation outcome was used to evaluate universities' performance and indicate funding allocation (PM-01, PM-03). However, responding to public concerns, government regulations were amended. Currently, the accreditation results are used as a reference but not as a sole indicator to make an absolute funding allocation decision (PM-04).

Previously, the government used the result to rate universities. Hence, academic pressure derived from HEEACT evaluation result was massive. Some would like to rush through the process. So, they faked their research or even bought it. It causes a lot of *I* problems, *SSCI* and *SCI*. Many professors could not stand it. Many scholars voiced the contradiction between accreditation for improvement and evaluation for performance rating. Eventually, there was an amendment of its usage (PM-04).

While two university administrators praised HEEACT of its improvement and professionalism (UA-07, UA-08), one questioned whether the evaluation result remains an underlying indicator to justify the government funding allocation (UA-03).

They [HEEACT] have changed their role. The unit was first established in 2005, we felt like their close relationship with the Ministry of Education would affect us. Later on, they adopted peer review measures and has become on par with other international accreditation associations. As a HEEACT reviewer, we learn from each other but we also bear pressure in learning (UA-08).

What they [HEEACT] look at is the consistency between the University's motto and what university members do. These two must be consistent. Now, they [HEEACT] are very strict, they go word by word. We have to justify what we do, based on our institutional motto (UA-07).

Although it is claimed that the result will be used as a reference only, do you really think the government will not make a link between university performance results from HEEACT and funding allocation? (UA-03)

Institutional autonomy

Most participants associating with the government attested that social expectation significantly influences the government policies and hence defines how *autonomy* is interpreted in Taiwan's society. The notion of autonomy has been indigenised to accommodate social response and opinion in Taiwan Sinic society (PM-03, UA-06).

Here, academic freedom and institutional autonomy have been much localised. It is because society's opinion and demands pressure us. They expect that the Ministry of Education monitors universities to ensure overall stability and fairness in society. According to the *University Act*, when there are controversial issues, the Ministry of Education has the final supervisory power (PM-03).

According to *Constitution of the Republic of China* Article 162, 'All public and private educational and cultural institutions in the country shall, in accordance with the law, be subject to the state supervision' (Office of President, 2018). In a similar vein, *University Act* Article 1 states 'Universities shall be guaranteed academic freedom and shall enjoy autonomy within the range of laws and regulations.' and Article 3 states 'The competent authority of the Act shall be the Ministry of Education' (Ministry of Justice, 2018). In sum, while academic

freedom and institutional autonomy are deemed to be legitimate, universities' corresponding actions are subject to government supervision.

Government accountability versus university autonomy

Awareness of government's accountability is explicit in the interview with one senior official.

> Our Ministry of Education centrally approves an establishment of universities. In the US, this is not the case. By law, the federal government is not involved in this process. University-related affairs belong to the state government. For us, things are centralised. If one university shuts down, who is responsible for the closure? Shall the Ministry of Education be involved? The answer is yes. In essence, there is no way for us to be as independent as the West. It's our government's accountability to the society (PM-01).

Taiwan's Ministry of Education is under the Executive Yuan of the central government. While the central government presumes its supervisory role over the universities in response to society's demand, the President of University A expects more institutional self-governance to be given. He shared: 'In many aspects of our work, the Ministry of Education manages us too much. It is better now that a lot of things can be more permissible. Still, our Ministry of Education imposes many laws and regulations. The flexibility is not sufficient' (UA-02). Reasonably, an experienced administrator explained that the conflict of interest causing the tension between the two.

> The government serves the whole country and universities serve their community. The government thinks more about the overall fairness but individual university concerns more about its performance under the current competitive environment. Hence, the institutional independence and autonomy interpreted by the Ministry of Education may sometimes be different from what universities understand. This often leads to disputes (UA-05).

The participants below voiced frustrations.

> The *University Act* is there. It's just a matter of how we interpret it. The government cannot interfere with universities' management. We all know that. But when needed, the government would interpret the circumstance in a way that gives them an excuse to be involved anyway (PM-04).

> Throughout various efforts that the government has repeatedly tried to decentralise the system since the 1994 reform, we are still under strict control. Our tuition fee cannot be raised, and special programs cannot be offered unless the government approves them. What flexibility do we have after all? (UA-11)

> It's a matter of financial dependence. If universities want to have full autonomy, they need to be financially independent and self-sustained (PM-06).

Evidently, there has been an emerging tension between universities and the government. An interview with a senior scholar who formerly worked for the Ministry of Education yet turned to be an academic at University A offered unique insight.

I previously served in the Ministry of Education. When I had my job interview with the [University A] committee, they asked me a very sharp question: 'If I were employed by [University A], would I speak for [University A] or for the Ministry of Education?' You know what that means, right? [University A] and the Ministry of Education are like water and oil or water and fire (UA-07).

Democracy in a Confucian society

Taiwan is a non-Western society with a considerably large degree of democracy (Mengin, 2007) in comparing with other Sinic counterparts. Despite the overwhelming concerns with the dominance of the government, a senior official attested to a drawback of democracy: 'Our democracy has gone overboard. Public opinion has been too high in the past few years and it significantly affects government policy. The government needs to deal with their voices.' (PM-06). The downside is that social forces sometimes turn to populism that people may not see things farther and wider (PM-04).

Echoing the relational yet hierarchical aspect of Confucianism in a democratic society, the Faculty Dean annotated Taiwan's political culture and the instability of government strategies: 'Our educational policy is unstable and often ties to social responses and politics. Ultimately, it is all about gaining votes in the election; hence, we are not able to fulfill our own wish in the long run' (UA-04).

A senior policymaker illustrated the relationship between universities and the government implying Taiwan as a relational society.

I would say previously the government and universities are like father and son. Perhaps, it was even like the emperor and citizen in the past. Today, although there is still a hierarchy, the relationship has been as teacher and student. In the future, this will turn to be older and younger brothers or even friend and friend. Eventually, it will be complete teamwork with a collegial relationship (PM-09).

When asked about the challenges of Taiwan's higher education development, a senior policymaker elaborated the strong state influence as an add-on to the existing challenges. Meanwhile, he attested that this central role of government is part of the culture. Hence, it is not likely to change.

The current challenges are unprecedented. In addition to a low fertility rate and cross-strait tension, our government still takes so much control. It's a culture. There is no way we can change it. In Taiwan, the government needs to manage universities because people think it is a national responsibility to the taxpayers. That is an expectation in a democratic society. The government serves our people. Or else, why do they need the government? (PM-08)

The above quote reflects democratic thinking in Confucian societies with a strong emphasis on order. Given the notion of democracy that has been internally shaped by the Confucian ethos in which social and political orders are fundamental, Taiwan's government presumes its role to manage universities.

Discussion

Further to Marginson's (2011) study of the Confucian model of higher education in East Asia, we have examined Taiwan's higher education development that has been systematically geared towards adopting modern university structures, values, and practices. In spite of the highly institutionalised Western education system, Confucian heritage and values remain pervasive in Taiwan. A relationship between the nation-state and its citizens with strict sociopolitical order has long been highlighted in Sinic societies, with strong drive from the state and close supervision or even control toward educational agendas and priorities (Marginson, 2011). Such relationship has had its deep historical roots dating back to the Spring and Autumn Era (770-453 BCE) and the Warring States Periods (453-221 BCE) (Gardner, 2014). Confucianism searches for a stable social and political order and emphasises that such order must be based on moral principles not simply on authority (Madsen, 2008). In Confucianism, a central core is a system of harmonious relationships with differentiated roles and duties (Chan, 2008). The influence of Confucianism has spread beyond China to other East Asian societies. These values have continued to evolve in part as a response to the political development and as a challenge of other schools of thought in the historical periods until the present day (Chan, 2008).

Reflecting on the interview data, Taiwan's higher education system has seemingly undertaken decentralised approaches with recentralised state control. In other words, decentralisation and democratisation do not mean a total withdrawal of the government in Taiwan. Indeed, the role of the state remains strong in higher education. This echoes what Watkins (1993) terms as *centralised decentralisation*: although the role played by the state is indirect, it is however powerful in influencing all higher education institutions especially via funding allocation (Hou, 2011). However, unlike the situations in many Western societies (Jaschik, 2011), the close alignment between universities and government with a high level of support and intervention is more evident in Taiwan.

The direction of higher education development is much associated with government goals in Taiwan. The classification of universities and their funding allocation schemes reflect Confucian belief that societies flourish through and benefit from groups or individuals with different yet complementary roles. With the hierarchy of social relations, some roles take priority over others while each role has clearly defined duties. Reciprocity and mutual responsibility among them are fundamental to the Confucian concept of human relations (Bloom, 2009). Whereas Altbach's (2016) *feet of clay* notion concerns about an unbalanced funding allocation across the Chinese mainland higher education system, Taiwan's government has differentiated types of the universities and has diversified funding to support the majority of higher education institutions.

Taiwan government maintains its supervisory role to support and influence universities through funding allocation and commissioned accreditation agent. At a system level, the fiscal budgetary plan allocated to support higher education is closely associated with state policies. To strike a balance between questing world-class status and serving local needs, the government has shifted its policy from promoting *excellence* to ensuring *equity*. It is empirically evident that the financial mode with high dependence on government funding allows the state to maintain its ascendancy towards universities. In addition, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, HEEACT has been established to accredit universities. This *principal-agent model* with strong state presence and reliance on government (Hawkins, Lake, Nielson, & Tierney, 2006) sets another example of the government's intent to decentralise the system while recentralising its supervision. Universities thus encounter *autonomy-accountability trade-off* (Newman Couturier, & Scurry, 2004). They hold

accountability for performance and are complied with the state's expectations. The supervisory power of the state holds universities accountable for performance while universities are encouraged to become more autonomous.

The principle of autonomy is regarded as a non-negotiable condition for upholding institutional function in the West (Neave, 2012). This study has found a deviation from such original meaning. University autonomy can be interpreted differently in East Asia. The variations of university autonomy, to a significant degree, reflect the vagaries and specificities of a nation's cultural and political history (Neave, 2012). While Western institutional autonomy is a binding contract between the state and higher education, Confucianism focuses on mutual responsibility and sustaining between society and the state (Gardner, 2014). Confucian political culture view it as a major aim of the state to support citizens in the pursuit of a good life by means of the law, education, provision of resources, and coordination of social groups and their activities (Chan, 2008). This explains Taiwan's state role in higher education which emphasises an obligation to serve society's interest and a strong state that directs resources on the basis of performance goals and capacity building objectives (Marginson, 2011). Nevertheless, under this hierarchical structure, the notion of institutional autonomy could be marginalised in exchange for the stability and fairness judged by the government.

There have been a number of disputes with regard to the compatibility of Confucianism and Western democracy in the past century. Some argue that Confucianism hinders democratisation while others affirm that the two can be coherently articulated (Wang, 2003). While some insist that the strict hierarchical social structure is not conducive to the development of democracy (Hsieh, 2015), East Asians admittedly put less emphasis on infusing Confucian values as they embrace modernity (Bell & Chaibong, 2003). Taiwan's development has shown that embracing modernity through democracy, nation-state policy in higher education is, to an increasing degree, influenced by a society's expectation. Demonstrated in this study, the close connection among universities, the state and society reflects Confucian values in which relationship is foundational and individuals are not a solitary body but a body with an existence in the group (Yang, 2011). Together as a whole they form a seamless connection (Huang, 2009) and live in an interdependent community.

Concluding remarks

Previous studies have confirmed an increasingly institutionalised state influence in Confucian societies (Marginson, 2011; Shin, 2013). This study contemplates the invigorating role of the state as a policy driver in modern Confucian society. On the verge between embracing Western academic values and preserving its lingering and strong traditions, Taiwan's higher education system has encountered the challenge to integrate the two. This study has identified a close relationship between universities, the state, and society, while public opinion remains influential and often affects government policies. Taiwan's higher education was under the tight grip of the government during the imposition of martial law. Through repeated amendments of the *University Act*, universities have been granted autonomy in some aspects of their operations. However, the role of the state remains prominent resulting in the system with decentralised approaches and recentralised state control. On one hand, the state attempts to liberate its higher education system aiming to promote the core values of modern universities. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education strictly retains its supervisory role in response to social expectations demonstrating the longstanding sociopolitical order in Sinic societies.

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in its explicit emphasis on a cultural perspective to observe the relationship between premier universities and the government in Taiwan. It empirically demonstrates how the universities work with the government and how the latter maintains its influence through a system of checks and balances. However, the empirical data that it relies on are limited to one flagship university only. Its findings, therefore, do not intend to represent an accurate and complete picture of Taiwan's higher education development. In addition, further research that provides multi-layered investigation beyond premier universities would enrich such a research field. Nevertheless, if Confucian societies are to bring into the global community aspects of their rich educational and cultural heritage, which could open up new pathways through some of the current and potential dead ends, their flagship universities are the place where we are likely to encounter these ideas (Hayhoe, 2005). Studies of such premier institutions could shed light on the cultural promises and challenges of higher education systems in general and in Confucian societies particularly (Yang, 2019).

Apart from the conventional presumption based primarily on Western theories, this study has portrayed a distinctive scene of higher education governance in a non-Western society. Precisely, it reveals frustrations and achievements spawned from the coexistence of the imposed Western values and the deep-rooted socio-cultural traditions in Taiwan. As Taiwanese higher education strives to embrace modern academic models from the West to free universities from government control, society remains to be profoundly influenced by its traditional belief in the interconnectedness between universities, the state, and society. Practically, this study reveals complex relations between various forces in the system and serves as a reflection to raise cultural awareness among Taiwan's policymakers and academics. In consideration of its achievement over the past decades and the challenges it encounters at present, if Taiwan is keen to bid for world-class status, the society needs to be fully conscious of the cultural facets of higher education development at various levels.

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Table 1: Participants from University A

Interviewee	Gender	Age	PhD	Discipline	Professional Rank	Administrative Level
UA-01	M	70-80	Overseas	Psychology	Professor	n/a
UA-02	M	60-70	Domestic	Medicine	Professor	President
UA-03	M	60-70	Overseas	Physics	Professor	Vice President
UA-04	F	50-60	Overseas	Literature	Professor	Faculty Dean
UA-05	M	60-70	Domestic	Science	Professor	Vice President
UA-06	M	50-60	Overseas	Engineering	Professor	Associate Dean
UA-07	F	50-60	Overseas	Education	Professor	Mid-level administrator
UA-08	M	60-70	Overseas	History	Professor	Faculty Dean
UA-09	M	60-70	Domestic	Chemistry	Professor	n/a
UA-10	M	50-60	Overseas	International Studies	Professor	n/a
UA-11	M	30-40	Overseas	Policy Management	Assistant Professor	Director
UA-12	F	40-50	Overseas	Education	Professor	n/a
UA-13	M	40-50	Overseas	Engineering	Professor	Mid-level administrator

Table 2: Participants from Higher Education-related Units

Interviewee	Gender	Age	PhD	Years of Experience	Professional Rank	Administrative Level
PM-01	F	40-50	Domestic	20-25	PhD.	Mid-level official, MOE
PM-02	F	50-60	Overseas	20-25	Professor	Head, HEEACT
PM-03	M	50-60	Overseas	25-30	Professor	Former Head, HEEACT
PM-04	M	60-70	Overseas	20-25	Professor	Board member, TWAEA & Former Head, HEEACT
PM-05	F	50-60	Overseas	25-30	Professor	Global ranking analyst
PM-06	F	50-60	Domestic	20-25	PhD.	Senior official, MOE
PM-07	F	50-60	Overseas	25-30	Professor	Advisor, MOE & Head, FICHET
PM-08	M	50-60	Domestic	30-35	Professor	Advisor, MOE
PM-09	M	50-60	Domestic	25-30	Professor	Former Head, Educational Bureau MOE

MOE: Ministry of Education
HEEACT: Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan
FICHET: Foundation of International Cooperation in Higher Education of Taiwan
TWAEA: Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association