

Chapter 4.

Reputation profiles of Chinese universities – converging with global trends or national characteristics?¹

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Introduction

The globalization, rationalization and standardization of universities could lead one to believe that analyzing the national reputation management profile of universities in different countries show similar results, i.e. convergence (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). Universities having to relate to international markets of research, resources, researchers and students would tend to focus in similar ways on international ‘league tables’ and a variety of symbols alluding to excellence. We know that such processes are evident among developed countries, with some variety, but not how these processes are working in developing countries. Can one expect simple imitation from countries in the West with the best university systems or are these processes more complex learning processes (Christensen, Dong, & Painter, 2008)? If the latter is the case, one can expect more of divergence features. A third possibility may be that convergence and divergence are combined in different patterns (Bleiklie et al., 2011; Delmestri, Oberg, & Drori, 2015).

Another way of looking at convergence and divergence in university reputation management profiles is to focus on the university system and its units in one country. Convergence features or a consistent national profile, like alluded to above, could result from international imitation but also from national control and standardized policies. While national divergence could result from a differentiated formal position or role of universities, from different tasks and functions, from differentiated environment, including sources of financing, from diverse student bodies, diverse research and teaching profiles, etc. (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017)

This study is set in such a double context of convergence or divergence. The empirical focus is on a selection of Chinese universities and their reputation management seen through a web survey. We will analyze both the comparative profile of China’s developing their

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universities, as seen through their reputation management, but also whether Chinese universities domestically have some of the same type of convergent or divergent profile as in developing countries.

Our main research questions are accordingly:

- What is overall typical for the reputation profile of Chinese universities reflected in their websites? What are the main types of symbols used and how are the different types balanced? How is the profile comparing with the profile of Western university systems?
- Is the reputation profile of universities in China characterized by internal convergence or divergence?
- What are some of the explanatory factors in comparing the university reform profile in China with Western countries, and in analyzing the convergence and divergence internally in China?

We will first briefly outline the three organization theory perspective used, followed by a context section, which is then combined in some expectations. This is followed by a brief method section, the main results, an analysis, and conclusion and implications.

Three theoretical perspectives on convergence and divergence of reputation

We will use the three perspectives included in a transformative approach to understand the convergence or divergence of university reputation profile in China (Christensen et al., 2007). First, an *instrumental perspective*, based on bounded rationality, would assume that reputation management is dominated by the top leadership, either in a hierarchical way or through negotiations (March & Simon, 1993; Simon, 1957). This could be done either by reputation build on systematic structural design or through systematic strategies for relating the meaning-making, image building or branding towards internal and external stakeholders (Wæraas & Maor, 2015).

If we relate this perspective to the four types of reputation that Carpenter propose (2010, 45-46), the *performative dimension* is very much instrumental in its nature, potentially stressing in our case whether the university deliver on the output and outcome of its core activity (Chapleo, Carrillo Durán, & Castillo Díaz, 2011). But the *procedural dimension* of reputation is also typical instrumental, for example when the focus is on how well a university is dealing with the process aspect, i.e. using the right procedures and rules in their activities and decisions. This dimension also deals with another crucial aspect, namely the formal affiliation of a

university towards its superior authority/ministry and how this is playing out in practice concerning control versus autonomy.

Second, a *cultural perspective* on reputation would look at historical-institutional features and their relevance. Through path-dependency and the focus on informal norms and values, the reputation profile will be heavily influenced by the feature that ‘roots’ determine ‘routes’, meaning that the historical trajectory is crucial and overrepresented currently (Selznick, 1957). Leaders would be less instrumental and more ‘carriers of the necessities of history’, meaning that they will be limited in what is seen as appropriate use of reputation symbols (March, 1994).

Focusing on informal norms and values connect with the *moral dimension* of reputation (Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter & Krause, 2012), i.e. for example alluding through symbols that an university is open and caring towards different views and features concerning ethnicity, religion, gender, etc. The *technical* or *professional* dimension also has a cultural flavor, meaning that symbols could relate to basic professional informal norms and values developed over time, to their high ethical standards or professional competence.

A *myth or neo-institutional environmental perspective* focusing on the institutional environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), emphasizes the wider national and global cultural and social context the organizations are operating in. These contexts contains national and international public organizations, global multinational consulting and accounting firms, international certification and standardization firms, NGOs, media, etc., which all provide information that one is taken-for-granted is ‘objective’ and influence reputation management (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). According to this perspective organizations would be heavily influenced by the macro-environmental context these actors represent, through a steady stream of myths, symbols, fashions and fads that they have to relate to and they only partly can influence. They relate to them in their reputation management, often through ‘double-talk’ or hypocrisy, because they expect to achieve more legitimacy and support (Brunsson, 1989; March, 1994).

This perspective may relate to all Carpenter’s dimensions of reputation. Generally, a university may use symbols exaggerating its performances, through being selective in what they are focusing on or just brag a lot knowing that few stakeholders would actually try to find out what is the objective reality. Or more specifically, the leadership could actively further their reputation using university rankings or ‘league tables’, when it suits them, or stress how innovative and close to the business community they are, or how much they deliver concerning services for the students (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017).

The moral dimension is in principle rather wide open for use of symbols that argue that universities have to attend to the international environment, in a deterministic reputation way, because of global trends ‘which time has come’ (Røvik, 2002). This could be related to being compassionate and open, engage the students, being multi-cultural and multi-religious, further gender equality, or tolerance related to transgender issues, etc.

The technical or professional reputation dimension, given this perspective, may relate to building an image as a ‘chosen’ professional university, like the technical/technological universities, with special national or international obligations (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017). Or, universities may use symbols that emphasize that they have educations that are internationally fashionable and ought to be expanded and get more resources, for example nano-technology or life science. Or, they may stress that their professors are top experts in an international perspective, which is adding to the performative dimension. Or, they can exaggerate how advanced and engaging learning methods they have, catering to the international student community.

The procedural dimension related to this perspective may lead to either symbols that stress how independent of the authorities universities are, or the opposite, how caring they are about collective solutions and having close contact with superior authorities. But the symbols may also related to the autonomy and rights of professors, and rights of students, like secure procedures of recruitment and exams, fairness of service provided to the students, etc.

Convergence in reputation profiles, i.e. making universities isomorphic in the way they talk about performance, informal cultural norms and values, professional profiles and procedures, may have a global connection, meaning that they are inspired by macro-related cultural and social environment (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). Universities try to imitated what they think is a global script of a modern and excellent world-class university. They can do this in different ways, either through fact-finding international travel, through simply imitate what they think the top world-class universities do, through attending to international stake-holders like business actors that try to pressure them to imitate what they see as success templates, etc. (Kosmützky, 2012). But, it may also be national driving forces for convergence, like national authorities ‘certifying’ certain reform concepts, research communities urging the government to follow up certain scripts, business actors trying to sell ambitious solutions to alleged problems, etc.

In an international comparison, *divergence* in reputation profile may have many reasons. One is the based on the simple fact that alleged imitation from a global template or from other countries may lead to national versions that are different because the structural and cultural

context is different (Westney, 1986). Another and connected, is that national isomorphy may mean global divergence, just because of different national contexts. A third reason is that universities have different tasks and functions and therefore also different reputation profiles (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Some universities may be top research universities with a lot of international collaboration and autonomy, while others may be universities with a profile of educating different professions with less autonomy. Some universities have a heavy teaching profile, like former polytechnics, while other have a reputation profile influenced by a close connection to the business community or the area they are located in.

A combined profile of convergence and divergence may relate to the fact that national profiles reflect and filters global scripts through national cultural features (Olsen, 1992). And/or the influence of global trends are affecting the universities differently or there are differences between countries in how active the governmental or other actors are actively being entrepreneurs for global trends (Delmestri, Oberg, & Drori, 2015).

The context – characteristics of the Chinese university system

The form universities got in China were borrowed or imitated from the West in late nineteen century, and the first cohort of universities were founded in 1890s. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, universities were mainly located in a few large cities, and only some thousands of people could be enrolled. Then all universities were run by the government by the Communist Party of China (CPC), and curriculums became increasingly ideology-oriented. College students and faculty were accused to be a threat to the ruling regime, and intellectuals were often targeted during political campaigns such as the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976).

Before 2001, universities had long been monopolized by the government, and nonprofits and private sectors were not allowed to found universities, let alone foreign corporations. Universities in China were primarily public, while private universities were largely marginalized. The majority of universities are founded, controlled, and financed by government departments at various levels. The government is keen in promoting higher education development to increase gross enrollment rate, which helps to improve the quality of the workforce. Universities were encouraged to amalgamate with each other or build new campuses to expand their enrollment in early 2000s. According to the official statistics released by MOE, there have been 2,880 colleges and universities with 36.99 million enrolled students by 2016,

with a gross enrollment ratio of 42.7 percent, which means over four tenths of eligible young people are enrolled with higher education. Among them, there are 742 private colleges and universities with 6.34 million enrolled students, signaling a slightly changing policy.²

The last decade or so, the government has invested enormously in higher education, and various plans and programs have been implemented to support the development of universities. Among them, 211 and 985 type programs are the most prestigious ones. The Project 211 aims to develop 100-strong universities to be world-class universities, and they were chosen based on academic potentials and geographical representativeness. The Project 985 initiated in May 1998 is Chinese version of Ivy League, and only 39 elite universities are included. These universities get earmarked the lion's share of government spending in higher education, and they are competitive even in the international community. High school students have to pass the well-known college entrance exam (*Gaokao*) to be enrolled into universities, and only exceptional students can be recruited by elite universities (Wang et al., 2013).

The latest national higher education program is the Double World-Class Program, which aims to advance world-class universities and disciplines in China. The program was released in October 2015, and all prior programs and projects (e.g., Project 985, Project 211, key disciplines program) were incorporated into this umbrella program. MOE promulgated the list of universities and disciplines included in the program in September 2017, covering 42 universities (36 of A category and 6 of B category) and 95 universities respectively. The world-class universities category includes 39 universities of the Project 985 and three non-985 universities. Apart from 115 universities of the Project 211, 25 non-211 universities are included in the world-class disciplines category. These universities will receive a lion's share of government spending, and they are expected to be among world-class universities by 2030. Their performance are going to be assessed every five years, and those underperform will be excluded from this privilege.

Given their history and funding sources, universities can be either affiliated with central ministries or local governments (e.g., provinces and prefecture-level cities). Central universities are primarily coordinated by the Ministry of Education, and only a few are controlled by other ministries (e.g., Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, National Audit Office). At local level, universities are financed by provincial or municipal governments. Depending on where the universities are located, they may receive rather different levels of financial support

² Ministry of Education. 2016 National statistical bulletin on the development of Education, July 10, 2017. http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb_sjzl/sjzl_fztjgb/201707/t20170710_309042.html.

and policy leverage. Universities in the coastal affluent provinces, for instance, can be well supported by local governments to recruit faculty, attract students, and upgrade infrastructures. Universities located in inland provinces, in contrast, struggle to meet the ends and reverse the ‘brain drain’.

The government is ambivalent about the roles played by universities. On the one hand, universities are relied on heavily by the government to produce eligible human resources and scientific research to engine economic growth. On the other hand, they are firmly controlled by the Party for ideological reasons, since universities are usually thought of as the seedbed of student movements. Universities are not only pursuing academic achievements, but also to fulfill political and ideological purposes. For instance, all universities are equipped with party secretaries (externally called chairpersons) at both university and college/school/department levels, and presidents are usually appointed by parental ministries or departments. The political and ideological dimension of reputation management may help explain the extent to which universities are homogeneous or heterogeneous in manipulating reputation symbols.

Expectations based on perspectives and context

Universities in China manage their reputation by various approaches, and we expect that all the four dimensions of reputation could be found on their online presentations. Both international norms and practices and domestic policies and contexts affect strategies and tactics of reputation management of Chinese universities, which means that there are motives for both convergence and divergence.

First, we expect that universities in China share to some extent with universities in other countries in reputation management, given the increasing impacts of international norms and practices. Internalization has been increasingly emphasized in various aspects of college operations. China is eager for international talents and returned oversea students, and they play a pivotal role in reshaping the orientation of Chinese universities. Nowadays, only people with degrees from oversea universities can be recruited by elite universities in China. Faculties are encouraged to publish in international journals, and overseas visiting is usually one of the preconditions of tenure appointment and promotions. Both governments and universities pay special attention to their relative standings against international university rankings and ratings (e.g., THE, QS, and WAR), which may drive their strategies in reputation management to mimic established practices in leading countries.

Second, we expect that Chinese universities may also differ from counterparts in other countries in reputation management, partially because of ideological considerations and bureaucratic arrangement. Universities must follow the guidelines of the Party in propaganda and communication, which may orient them to focus more on performance and moral dimensions than on professional/technical aspects³. Universities are operated like a bureaucracy instead of an academic institution (Ying et al., 2017), which may make reputation management lean towards professional dimensions. We thus expect that reputation management of universities in China may be different to some extent from that of Western countries.

Apart from cross-country comparison, we also examine variations across universities within China. Reputation management of universities may differ because of their various history, focus, size, standing, etc. Universities with longer history may be more rooted in the field, and are more likely to reap various achievements. They are more likely to emphasize their long-standing values and mission instead of tangible assets and outputs.

We also expect that general and specialized universities to differ in their styles and operations (Christensen and Gornitzka 2017). General or comprehensive universities are more likely to highlight their diversity and competence in catering to societal development. In contrast, specialized universities are leaned towards their exceptional achievements in niches. Among specialized universities, they are also supposedly different across science, engineering, and humanities and arts. Science and engineering universities might highlight professional and performative dimensions, while universities of humanities and arts might emphasize moral dimension.

Large universities usually are more likely to build their reputation by focusing on performance dimension, while medium and small sized universities prefer moral and professional dimensions. High-ranking elite universities are more established, and they are more likely to pay attention to moral and performance dimensions. In contrast, ordinary universities may focus on their professional dimension.

³ The procedural dimension is less relevant for Chinese universities and excluded from this study.

Data and methods

Sample and data sources

We focus on the 100-strong universities enlisted by the Project 211 for three reasons. First, these universities are representative in terms of academic focus, reputation, and geographic location. Second, the sampled universities are comparable. Last, the data on these universities are comprehensive and suitable for analyses reported in this study. Among the Project 211 universities, 39 universities are covered in the Project 985.

These elite universities are homogeneous, and we also include a sample of 30 ‘mediocre’ universities for comparison (see chapter 1 for an overview of the universities selected). We randomly sample one university not enlisted by the Project 211 from each of the 30 provinces (municipalities or autonomous regions) in mainland China. Taken together, our sample covers 146 universities. In comparison with the Project 211 universities, the 30 randomly-sampled universities are generally lower-ranked. They could be thought ‘mediocre’ nationwide, however, they are regionally influential (i.e., provincially prominent).

The data are mainly from two sources. The reputation variables are manually coded by browsing universities’ official websites. Other variables about universities’ basic facts are from open data sources and official statistics compiled by the MOE.

The measurement of variables

We use the codebook of Christensen and Gornitzka (2017) to code reputation management of Chinese universities. We focus on three dimensions of reputation across six domains. The three reputation dimensions are performance, moral, and professional or technical categories. The six domains are history (founding, relocation, merging), strategies and vision (long-term goals and core values), research, teaching/education, other internal features (facilities, procedures, work environment); and environmental attributes (location, industry). We use three categories to code the use of symbols in each dimension within each domain: (1) If the symbols are not mentioned, then we code “low” (1); (2) if the symbols are only mentioned briefly, then we code “medium” (2); (3) if the symbols are mentioned and emphasized or highlighted, then we code “high” (3).

The size of universities is measured by two variables, one is the total number of students and staffs (highly correlated, $r=0.71$, $p<0.05$). The other is the total budgetary revenue and spending of the latest year (highly correlated, $r=0.97$, $p<0.05$). The two categories of size

measures are also moderately correlated (r ranges from 0.40 to 0.60). We classify universities into three types by their prioritized disciplines or areas, including general or comprehensive (balanced in every discipline), science and engineering (natural and medical sciences), and others (including humanities and arts, social sciences). In our sample, the shares of the three types are 36, 31, and 33 percent respectively.

The ranking of universities is gauged by mainstream international and domestic university rankings. We divide universities into three categories by their relative standing in the rankings, including (1) high-ranked, (2) medium-ranked, and (3) low-ranked. As a rule of thumb, we treat universities of the Project 985 and the Project 211 as high- and medium-ranked (i.e., elite universities) respectively, and otherwise low-ranked. In the sample, the portions of the three categories are 20, 53 and 27 percent respectively.

The age of universities is measured by the number of years since their founding. For universities with a history of merging, splitting, and other reorganizing, we use their original founding year as the starting point. The earliest modern universities in China were founded in the 1890s (e.g., Wuhan University, Tianjin University, Jiaotong University), the late Qing Dynasty, while many were restructured after PRC's founding in 1949. As such we split the universities into old and young by the watershed of 1949, with 54 percent old and 46 percent young (founded in or after 1949).

We compare the three categories of universities to have a look at their differences (see Table 1.1). Generally speaking, high-ranked universities were founded earlier (Mean=1926), recruiting more students (Mean=35769) and faculty members (Mean=3010), and earning (Mean=6.19 billion RMB) and spending more (Mean=5.01 billion RMB) than medium- and low-ranked universities. In terms of type, half of high-ranked universities are general or comprehensive (53.9%), and one third are science and engineering, with 12.8% of others.

Main results

General patterns of reputation management

The descriptive statistical results (Table 4.1) reveal that, taken together, the sampled universities focus more on professional (Mean=10.6, SD=1.9) and performative reputations (Mean=9.7, SD=1.8) than moral one (Mean=6.8, SD=1.5). Chinese universities are different from Nordic ones, which emphasize more moral reputation than performative and professional ones (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017). One possible reason is that different from

equalitarianism in Nordic countries, Chinese society is more hierarchical with higher power distance. The pragmatic orientation also strengthens universities' focuses on professional and performative reputations rather than on moral ones.

Table 4.1 Reputation management of Chinese universities

	History	Strategy	Research	Teaching	Internal	Environment	Total
Performance	2.0	2.0	2.2	2.2	1.2	1.4	9.7
Moral	1.5	1.7	1.1	1.3	1.3	1.0	6.8
Professional	1.9	1.4	2.4	2.7	2.0	1.7	10.6
Total	5.3	5.1	5.6	6.2	4.5	4.2	

Note: $N=138$. The websites of eight universities were inaccessible during the period of data collection.

In terms of the six domains, we find that reputational signals are more used in teaching (Mean=6.2, SD=0.9), research (Mean=5.6, SD=1.0), and history (Mean=5.3, SD=0.8), followed by strategy (Mean=5.1, SD=0.7), internal attributes (Mean=4.5, SD=0.7), and environment (Mean=4.2, SD=0.4). Despite environmental characteristics significantly shape universities' reputation management, the sampled ones do not pay attention equivalent to that of internal attributes. In the sample only 61 universities (44%) mentioned their environmental attributes. Only inland and local universities highlight the impacts of their geographical locations, whereas the majority take the environment as granted.

In the heading of history, performative and professional reputational signals are highlighted, while the use of moral one is scarce. Universities are keen in enumerating prominent figures (e.g., alumni, faculty, presidents) in their history, as well as their achievements in research, education, and outreach to the society.

In the category of strategy, performance is emphasized in reputation management, followed by moral and professional ones. Performance metrics (e.g., rankings and ratings) are ubiquitously employed by the universities as gauges of successes of their strategies. Moral signals are primarily about universities' contributions to local development and communities.

With regard to the heading of research, performative and professional signals are almost equivalently employed, as there are well-known metrics to gauge academic excellence (e.g., top journal publications, science awards). Universities are also interested in the professional standings of their faculty members (e.g., the number of fellows of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and Chinese Academy of Engineering (CAE), and other national talent programs). In contrast, moral signals are seldom mentioned, partially because only research scandals like academic misconducts are relevant in this domain.

In terms of teaching and education, professional signals are mostly employed, followed by performative ones. Again, moral signals are least mentioned. Chinese universities prefer to highlight various titles received by their faculty members, which are mainly used as proxies of teaching quality. The number of quality graduates and job prospects, among others, are usually mentioned to reflect education achievements. Despite morality is among the key competence of graduates, it is scarcely employed in reputation management.

For the profile of other internal attributes, only professional signals are strongly presented, while the other two are not frequently mentioned. Infrastructures and hardware (e.g., labs, facilities) are relatively more employed as reputation signals of internal attributes than software and spirits (e.g., institutions, academic freedom, diversity). There are few accepted performance standards, and performative signals are seldom used. Also, moral signals are not highly relevant in this domain.

Finally, under the heading of environment, only professional and performative signals are marginally mentioned, while moral ones are not used at all. As mentioned above, few universities have a heading dedicated to external environment (N=61), despite its paramount importance to their strategic planning and implementation. One of the reasons is that Chinese universities are rather egocentric, and they disproportionally dedicate their limited space to themselves.

Variations across universities

There are no significant variations across the three types of universities (general, engineering, and others) in the use of reputation symbols. All three types of universities follow similar patterns, highlighting more professional and formative symbols than moral ones (Table 4.2). Notably, performative symbols are relatively less weakly emphasized for other universities than general and engineering ones. Universities specializing in arts, humanities and social sciences have less accepted performance standards, which restrains them from employing performative symbols.

Table 4.2 Attributes of universities and use of reputation symbols

Attribute of institution	Category	Type of reputation symbol		
		Performance	Moral	Professional
Rank	High	10.0	7.1	10.6
	Medium	9.6	6.7	10.4
	Low	9.9	6.4	11.3
Type	General	9.7	6.6	10.2

	Engineering	9.9	6.9	10.7
	Others	9.6	6.8	11.0
Size	Small	9.6	7	10.8
	Medium	9.7	6.7	11.7
	Large	9.8	6.6	10.4
Age	Young	9.7	6.7	10.5
	Old	9.8	6.8	10.8

We find that the use of reputation symbols is not significantly different between young and old universities, suggesting history is not a key factor in Chinese high education. Part of the reason is that universities in China are relatively younger than their counterparts in Western countries, which may underestimate their variations due to history. Still we find that universities with longer history have slightly more to showcase in all three reputation dimensions, because they generally have accumulated more assets.

We divide universities into three almost equal groups by the total number of students. In terms of size, we find that larger universities are slightly more likely to present performative symbols. It is understandable that larger universities are stronger in many performance metrics (e.g., various outputs) due to their scale, and they are inclined to employ performative symbols to justify their large inputs. Smaller universities are relatively more inclined to present their moral and professional symbols, partially because they can leverage these reputation categories. In the same token, we reveal that high-ranked universities (proxy by the Project 985) use slightly more performative symbols. High-ranked universities are stronger in research and teaching performance, and they may leverage these advantages to attract various stakeholders' attention.

We also compare universities in terms of six reputation categories, and again the differences across university rankings, types, sizes, and ages are not well established (see Table 4.3). We find that higher-ranked universities are more likely to use reputation symbols in the field of research, while lower-ranked ones prefer internal attributes. Comprehensive and science and engineering universities are more interested in managing reputation in research than other universities. Larger universities are more likely to present reputation symbols in the fields of research, teaching, and environment, since these aspects are their core competition advantages. We find that younger universities emphasize more in their strategy, which may help them to differentiate them from established universities.

Table 4.3 Attributes of universities and reputation categories

Category		Reputation category					
		History	Strategy	Research	Teaching	Internal	Environment
Rank	High	5.3	5.1	5.9	6.2	4.4	4.3
	Medium	5.5	5.1	5.6	6.2	4.4	4.2
	Low	5.0	5.0	5.5	6.1	4.7	4.4
Type	General	5.2	5.1	5.8	6.2	4.5	4.2
	Engineering	5.4	5.0	5.7	6.2	4.4	4.2
	Others	5.3	5.1	5.4	6.1	4.5	4.3
Size	Small	5.2	5.1	5.4	6.1	4.5	4.2
	Medium	5.4	5.0	5.8	6.1	4.4	4.2
	Large	5.3	5.1	5.7	6.3	4.5	4.4
Age	Young	5.3	5.2	5.6	6.2	4.5	4.3
	Old	5.3	5.0	5.7	6.2	4.5	4.2

Discussion and conclusion

The focus in this chapter is to use data from Chinese universities to examine the convergence and divergence of reputation management. The main result is that universities in China emphasize more professional and performative symbols than moral ones, which is just the opposite of Nordic universities. In line with our expectations, this pattern of reputation management is jointly shaped by domestic ideology and international norms. The ubiquity and salience of rankings and ratings push universities to incorporate more performative symbols into reputation management, and those in China are not immune from global institutions. The top-down hierarchical mandates, together with fierce horizontal competition across universities, also drive them to embrace performative symbols. Public universities are keen in eliciting financial and other resources from the government, and they become increasingly result-oriented and performance-driven. This feature is more evident because of Chinese universities are in fact formal administrative units, i.e. they are not only influenced by global formalization and standardization but part of an unambiguous hierarchical system.

It is interesting that Chinese universities so scarcely employ moral symbols in their reputation management. It is possible that moral and ethical considerations are generic, deeply-embedded, and taken as granted, and universities cannot isolate themselves from others by moral symbols. In comparison with professional and performative symbols, moral ones are relatively softer and more intangible, which are not favored by pragmatic universities in China. Given frequent research scandals in many universities in China, moral symbols may also arouse negative impressions from the perspective of external stakeholders. An argument pointing in

another direction is that the competition among the universities potentially could use moral elements to appeal to the students.

Universities in China are rather similar in reputation management, and there are few variations of the use of reputation symbols across different sizes, ages, types, and ranks of universities. These elite universities are generally public, young, and homogeneous in many other aspects, which make them rather similar in the use of reputation symbols. The similarities among the Chinese universities that dominating our sample may have something to do with that they are all elite, but we find the results still hold when the randomly sampled lower-ranked universities are included. The implication is that China is diverging internationally albeit converging domestically, and this finding is solid and interesting for our understanding of reputation management from a comparative perspective.

Institutional isomorphism from government incentives, imitation and learning, as well as competition, orient universities in China to pursue similar reputation symbols. A possible reason is that the predominant Party ideological propaganda has made universities very homogeneous in reputation management. Universities are more likely to politically correctly and safely manage their reputation in line with official guideline, and few universities dare to adopt unorthodox approaches in reputation management.

Despite the homogeneity among universities' reputation management styles, still we find that science and engineering, older, larger, and high-ranked universities prefer to use performative symbols. We also reveal interesting differences of reputation management among various categories of attention. These findings can be used to develop theories to explain the variations of reputation management across universities. For instance, given the predominant pattern of homogeneity, why do universities employ different reputation symbols? The affiliations (e.g., the MOE or provincial governments) and leadership (e.g., presidents' succession and leadership style) of the universities, among others, may help to explain such variations. By incorporating more universities and examining other aspects of universities, it is promising to explore the variations of reputation management and their underpinning drivers and mechanisms.

Policy implications and future research avenues

In this chapter we describe the pattern of reputation management among universities in China, and our results reveal that the top cohort of universities in China are very similar in reputation management. Chinese universities predominantly rely on performative and professional

symbols in managing reputation, whereas moral aspects are not well incorporated into their reputation management profiles. Apart from the homogeneity of reputation management, we do find that reputation profiles differ slightly among universities with varying types, sizes, rankings, and ages. These findings generate helpful policy implications for universities in China to improve reputation management.

The fact that universities in China are rather homogeneous in reputation management, could lead to that both university boards and the government should pay attention to such high similarity. On the one hand, universities can change their reputation profiles to be unique and novel, otherwise they cannot stand out in an increasingly competitive and homogeneous circumstance. On the other hand, the government could consider empower universities to differentiate their reputation profiles, which help them to really improve social standings to become world-class universities. So there is a trade-off between control and competition.

Our study is limited in explaining the variations of reputation management among universities, and we call for future studies to draw on in-depth interviews and participant observations to interpret reputation profiles. It is also interesting to examine the ramifications of reputation management for organizational change and performance, to see if and to what extent the combinations of reputational symbols affect universities' outcomes.

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Appendix. The universities included in the Project 211

1. *Beihang University (formerly known as Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics)
2. *Beijing Institute of Technology
3. *Beijing Normal University
4. *Central South University
5. *China Agricultural University
6. *Chongqing University
7. *Dalian University of Technology
8. *East China Normal University
9. *Fudan University
10. *Harbin Institute of Technology
11. *Huazhong University of Science and Technology
12. *Hunan University
13. *Jilin University
14. *Lanzhou University
15. *Minzu University of China (formerly known as the Central University for Nationalities)
16. *Nanjing University
17. *Nankai University
18. *National University of Defense Technology
19. *Northeastern University
20. *Northwest A&F University
21. *Northwestern Polytechnical University
22. *Ocean University of China
23. *Peking University
24. *Renmin University of China
25. *Shandong University
26. *Shanghai Jiao Tong University
27. *Sichuan University
28. *South China University of Technology
29. *Southeast University
30. *Sun Yat-sen University
31. *Tianjin University

32. *Tongji University
33. *Tsinghua University
34. *University of Electronic Science and Technology of China
35. *University of Science and Technology of China
36. *Wuhan University
37. *Xiamen University
38. *Xi'an Jiaotong University
39. *Zhejiang University
40. Anhui University
41. Beijing Foreign Studies University
42. Beijing Forestry University (also known as Beilin University)
43. Beijing Jiaotong University
44. Beijing Sport University
45. Beijing University of Chemical Technology
46. Beijing University of Chinese Medicine
47. Beijing University of International Business and Economics
48. Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications
49. Beijing University of Technology
50. Beijing University of Technology
51. Central China Normal University
52. Central Conservatory of Music
53. Central University of Finance and Economics
54. Chang'an University
55. China Pharmaceutical University
56. China University of Geosciences (Beijing)
57. China University of Geosciences (Wuhan)
58. China University of Mining and Technology
59. China University of Mining and Technology (Beijing)
60. China University of Petroleum (Beijing)
61. China University of Petroleum (Huadong)
62. China University of Political Science and Law
63. Communication University of China
64. Dalian Maritime University
65. Donghua University

66. East China University of Science and Technology
67. Fourth Military Medical University
68. Fuzhou University
69. Guangxi University
70. Guizhou University
71. Hainan University
72. Harbin Engineering University
73. Hebei University of Technology
74. Hefei University of Technology
75. Hohai University
76. Huazhong Agricultural University
77. Hunan Normal University
78. Inner Mongolia University
79. Jiangnan University
80. Jinan University
81. Liaoning University
82. Nanchang University
83. Nanjing Agricultural University
84. Nanjing Normal University
85. Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics
86. Nanjing University of Science and Technology
87. Ningxia University
88. North China Electric Power University
89. North China Electric Power University (Baoding)
90. Northeast Agricultural University
91. Northeast Forestry University
92. Northeast Normal University
93. Northwest University
94. Qinghai University
95. Second Military Medical University
96. Shaanxi Normal University
97. Shanghai International Studies University
98. Shanghai University
99. Shanghai University of Finance and Economics

100. Shihezi University
101. Sichuan Agricultural University
102. Soochow University
103. South China Normal University
104. Southwest Jiaotong University
105. Southwest University
106. Southwestern University of Finance and Economics
107. Taiyuan University of Technology
108. Tianjin Medical University
109. Tibet University
110. University of Science and Technology Beijing
111. Wuhan University of Technology
112. Xidian University
113. Xinjiang University
114. Yanbian University
115. Yunnan University
116. Zhengzhou University
117. Zhongnan University of Economics and Law

Note: See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_211. The 39 elite universities (Project 985) are denoted with *, and see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_985 for the list. The 30 randomly sampled low-ranked universities are excluded from the list.