Social participation of social organizations in education governance in China

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Abstract
This study aims to understand how social organizations participate in education governance and how they interact with state actors in the context of education governance in China from a network governance perspective. Based on a multiple case study, we selected four social organizations (a think tank, an academic association, and a domestic, and overseas organization each focused on educational philanthropy) for this qualitative investigation. The study findings indicate that although the government of the People’s Republic of China uses a network approach to steer the country’s educational system, the government maintains its supremacy over social organizations, leading to hierarchical and submissive policy networks. However, social organizations may obtain the freedom to conduct their work and influence the educational system if they could gain the government’s political trust and support. These study’s findings suggest that the mode of Chinese education governance is a mixture of government, characterized by bureaucratic and top-down governing, and governance, characterized by the government steering society via collaborations with nonstate actors. Therefore, it can be conceptualized as a network government, reflecting China’s political and ideological systems by emphasizing the institutional monitoring and supervision of social organizations through policy networks to strengthen the state’s governing capabilities from the top down.

Keywords Education governance · Social governance · Network governance · Social participation · Social organizations

We will step up institution building in social governance and improve the law-based social governance model under which Party committees exercise leadership, government assumes responsibility, non-governmental actors provide assistance, and the public gets involved. We will strengthen public participation and rule of law in social governance and make such governance smarter and more specialized … We will strengthen the system of community governance, shift the focus of social governance to the community level, leverage the role of social organizations, and see that government’s governance efforts on the one hand and society’s self-regulation and residents’ self-governance on the other reinforce each other (Xi, 2017).

At the 19th National People’s Congress (NPC) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2017, Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the CPC, the Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and the President of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), officially articulated the need for China to develop a social governance system. The aforementioned quote by Xi Jinping articulates that the key feature of social governance is social participation in public affairs. Social participation is not a new phenomenon in China.

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The PRC government has mobilized the social participation of nonstate actors by establishing or subsidizing social organizations, which is an official term used by the PRC government to refer to nonprofit or civil society organizations since China’s liberation in 1949 and particularly in the *Interim Provision on the Registration of Social Organizations*, adopted in 1950 (Zhang, 2003). Moreover, Chinese economic and public sector reforms began in 1978 and have led to the decentralization, privatization, and marketization of the public sector, resulting in more opportunities for social participation (Howell, 1995). Although the PRC government exercised strict control over social organizations before the 1980s, it has relaxed its control over certain types of social organizations, such as professional associations and charities, since 2013 (Chan, 2018), resulting in the rapid proliferation of registered social organizations in China, for example, an increase from 320,000 in 2012 to 900,914 in 2021 (Zhong, 2021). In other words, the PRC government places great emphasis on collaboration with multiple nonstate actors to promote democracy and the rule of law with respect to steering society in the spirit of social governance (Zhu & Peters, 2019).

Accordingly, Tao (2021) posited that China is experiencing the global trend of the so-called governance turn, that is, a shift from the government (i.e., governing society via state bureaucracy) to governance (i.e., steering society via the collaboration of state nonstate actors in and through networks). Therefore, researchers suggest that social governance should be interpreted as a mode of network governance, which is an approach for steering societies through heterarchical collaborations with heterogeneous actors from the market and civil society to tackle public concerns in and through networks (Fulda et al., 2012; Teets, 2018; Zheng et al., 2010). The governance turn also implies that a dynamic interaction between state and nonstate actors in the context of the policy process may occur in China. Therefore, providing a theoretical framework to capture the dynamics of the Chinese policy process is necessary. Researchers have noted that the network governance perspective may enable achieving this goal because it is concerned with the power of and power relationships between state and nonstate actors in the context of policy processes (Chan, 2019; Tao & Liu, 2020).

Thus, from a network governance perspective, researchers have investigated patterns of interaction between state and nonstate actors in different policy areas in China, such as the environment (Teets, 2018), medical care (Zheng et al., 2010), and justice and housing (Zhu, 2013). Although certain researchers (e.g., Chan, 2019; Tao & Liu, 2020) have recently focused on network governance in the context of the Chinese educational system, this topic remains under-researched (Tao, 2021). Moreover, the literature has generally overlooked the role of social organizations in network governance with respect to Chinese education. Nevertheless, according to the network governance perspective, social organizations are essential governance actors (Junki, 2006). Therefore, this study investigates the interactions and collaborations between social organizations and state actors in China from a network governance perspective.

Additionally, the network governance perspective, developed in the context of Western liberal and democratic societies such as those in the United States and the United Kingdom, may not fully explain governance in China because China’s political system is a centralized system supported by political and cultural ideologies that differ from those underlying Western societies. As Yang (2020) suggested, a nation’s governance system is inextricably related to its main social, political, and cultural development trajectories. Thus, this study considers the structure of the state, especially the political and ideological structure of China, to advance the understanding of education governance in China and the overall network governance perspective. As we will explain, although the PRC may apply the network approach of governance, the network approach underlines the leadership and domination by the Party-state rather than heterarchical collaboration and relationship between the state and social organizations. In China, the dominant legal–political framework is that of the Party-state, which renders registered social organizations an extension of the Party–state (Feng, 2017). Therefore, the agency of those organizations may be politically restricted, even though they may be required to assist or work with the government to formulate and/or implement policies (Yang et al., 2016). In this sense, social organizations are governed by the central government within the mode of what the study proposes calling network governance, a mixture of governance and government, rather than network governance. After a critical review of the literature regarding the network governance perspective, to illustrate this argument, we present in this article a qualitative study that aims to answer two research questions—(1) How do social organizations participate in Chinese education governance? (2) How do social organizations interact with state actors in and through policy networks in China?—by investigating four social organizations’ social participation in China.

**Network governance perspective**

The concept of governance has been widely used to analyze the relationship between state and nonstate actors in the context of policy processes (Goodwin & Grix, 2011); thus, it is not a new concept. For instance, governance was used to refer to royal officers in France in the fourteenth
century and later to the bureaucratic capabilities of the state to govern a society via policy-making and implementation via a top-down approach (Katsamun’ska, 2016). In the social science literature, this conventional view is conceptualized as government or old governance to distinguish it conceptually from the contemporary meaning of governance, which emphasizes collaboration between state and nonstate actors to steer a society (Kennett, 2010). The reason for this shift is as follows: researchers observed that the state’s ability to monopolize the governance of society through policy-making and implementation via state bureaucracy alone was decreasing; as an alternative, they proposed that the governance should have been collaborating with nonstate actors to steer society throughout the policy-making process since the 1980s, when public sector reforms emphasizing marketization, privatization, and decentralization were initiated at multiple levels (Rhodes, 1997).

From a network governance perspective, continual collaborations between state and nonstate actors may create self-organizing policy networks, a set of formal and informal institutional connections among those actors structured around shared interests in policy processes (Rhodes, 1997). In policy networks, the power relationship between state and nonstate actors is typically equal and democratic because the states represent only one network actor who must negotiate and collaborate with other actors to arrive at mutually agreed-upon policy agendas and consensuses (Sørensen, 2002). Nevertheless, this does not imply that the state is entirely powerless (Goodwin & Grix, 2011). According to Ball (2009), the state remains able to steer society by supervising nonstate actors through a wide range of decentralized guidance strategies, such as contracting and performance management. Similarly, Marsh et al. (2003) claimed that the power relationship between state and nonstate actors remains asymmetric because state actors have access to a unique set of resources such as information and legislation, which is unavailable to nonstate actors but constrains and directs their actions. However, this does not mean that state actors can unconditionally dominate policy networks because nonstate actors may also have resources such as expertise, knowledge, and money that state actors value and need. In other words, state and nonstate actors must exchange resources in and through policy networks to some extent, leading to interdependence (Sørensen & Torfing, 2007).

The literature has suggested that network governance involves complex and dynamic social interactions in the context of policy networks (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Due to varying interests among policy network actors, they must negotiate with one another to maximize their benefits rather than maximizing collective well-being; this system leads to conflicts and strategic uncertainties that may discourage further collaboration and coordination (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). Reducing these conflicts and strategic uncertainties and facilitating cooperative behaviors among network actors requires mutual trust because it can enhance confidence among actors that other actors will behave reliably; this confidence increases actors’ willingness to consider others’ interests during social interactions (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012; Rhodes, 2007). Accordingly, the network governance perspective suggests that the contemporary mode of governance is characterized as a mode of governing in and through policy networks based on collaborative, interdependent, and mutually trusting relationships between state and nonstate actors (Enroth, 2011; Sørensen, 2002).

Characteristics such as collaboration, interdependence, and mutual trust among heterarchical actors reveal that network governance tends to favor liberal participation, which values involving nonstate actors in state action or establishing national or international and governmental/non-governmental institutions that facilitate equal participatory processes (Edwards & Klees, 2015). According to Edwards and Klees (2015), liberal participation highlights instrumental values because actors regard participation as a means of influencing others for their gain. For example, the concept of compensatory legitimation proposed by Weiler (1983) suggests that governments often create spaces for social participation in policy processes to generate buy-in and cooperation from the market and civil society to attain legitimacy; on the other hand, nonstate actors from the market and civil society prefer to involve state actors to enhance and legitimate their social status and participation. Moreover, Edwards and Klees (2015) argue that the decentralization and privatization initiatives of education reforms that value aspects of market logic such as accountability and competition may encourage neoliberal participation in education governance. In neoliberal participation, nonstate actors are encouraged to influence the institutional environment of education via school choice, the provision of educational services, and/or involvement with school councils. In addition to liberal and neoliberal participation, Edwards and Klees (2015) suggested that progressive participation can be an alternative form of social participation in education governance that promotes social justice by enabling and empowering individuals or groups to change existing power relationships in society. In progressive participation, individuals and groups, especially those that are oppressed, are encouraged or mobilized to participate in social movements (Anyon, 2014) or deliberatively democratic policy processes (Crocker, 2008).

Although governance in Western societies is a well-established perspective, recent studies have suggested that the network governance perspective does not capture the patterns of Chinese education governance (Chan, 2019; Han & Ye, 2017; Tao, 2021; Tao & Liu, 2020). For example, Han and Ye (2017) observed that the PRC government sometimes invite nonstate actors, especially private universities and
individual scholars, to form policy networks to inform policy-making, but these policy networks tend to be politically dominated by and bureaucratically accountable to the PRC government. Therefore, as Chan (2019) illustrated, nonstate actors, such as the schools investigated in his study, are typically incapable of negotiating with state actors regarding a predefined policy agenda. However, this does not suggest that they can only passively implement the predefined policy agenda; this is because they often insert their policy ideas into the predefined policy agenda—via the back-and-forth accommodation of their thoughts—through policy networks (Chan, 2019). This situation implies that policy networks may not be entirely either asymmetric or symmetric (Tao & Liu, 2020) and that the social participation of social organizations may not be liberal, neoliberal, or progressive in the context of Chinese education governance in the spirit of social governance (Mok et al., 2021). Accordingly, the interactions between state and nonstate actors may be more dynamic in China than might be expected from a network governance perspective. However, most studies on network governance in the Chinese educational system have tended to focus only on the role of nonstate actors, such as universities and schools, as public institutions (shiye danwei), which are quasi-governmental institutions organized and led by state organs to promote social welfare (Wei, 2019). In contrast with this type of nonstate actor, many social organizations are operated by civil societies but may have affiliations with government departments or receive funding from the state (Howell, 1995), such that these organizations are relatively independent and autonomous from the PRC government with respect to those public institutions. Thus, the nature of their social participation in Chinese education governance and their interactions with state actors may differ from those of public institutions. Therefore, investigating how social organizations participate in Chinese education governance and how they interact with state actors in and through policy networks in China may advance the understanding of Chinese education governance.

Methods

In China, think tanks, academic associations, and domestic and overseas philanthropic organizations and charities are the major types of social organizations participating in education governance (Su et al., 2022). Therefore, in this study, we investigated one case of each type to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between social organizations and state actors in China. The cases investigated in this study are described as follows.

The first case was that of Beijing Think Tank (a pseudonym). This organization was a large educational think tank in China established in the early 2010s; in 2020, it was listed in the Second Batch of Top National Think Tanks by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee. The second case was the China Education Association (a pseudonym), established in the 1970s. This organization was a large, nationwide academic association, namely 50 academic units, spanning a wide variety of research topics and interests; its members consisted of scholars and researchers throughout the nation. The third case was a domestic philanthropic organization known as Education Horizon (a pseudonym), established in 2006. Its work focuses on the promotion of educational equality, rural school development, community development, and social harmony in western China. Before data collection, Education Horizon had serviced 25 provinces and cities in China and established over 100 partnerships with organizations in the education and business sectors. The fourth case was an overseas philanthropic organization known as the IRD, established in 1997 in Hong Kong, which improved the living standards and enhance the development capabilities of the rural poor in China by providing medical and educational services. This small NGO operated in Baojing County, Hunan Province. It had three staff members based in Hong Kong and eight mainland staff members based in Baojing.

Data were collected between April and June 2020. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions, we could not conduct observational studies. To compensate for this limitation, we conducted intensive in-depth interviews (approximately 1.5–2 h each) with the founder, the chairperson, and four staff of these organizations who had worked there for at least 5 years and been nominated by the chairperson. During the interviews, in addition to probing questions, we invited interviewees to respond to the following interview questions: What is/are your/the social organization’s major duties? What are the challenges and difficulties for you/the social organization with respect to conducting this work? How do(es) you/the social organization manage and overcome these challenges and difficulties? How do you describe the relationships among you/the social organization, the government, and other stakeholders (if any)? How do you describe the effectiveness or influence of your/the social organization’s work? What is/are the key(s) for the social organization to be successful, according to your experience?

Moreover, we collected documents, such as policy documents related to social governance and participation and social organizations’ annual reports and websites, for further analysis. All data were transcribed. Next, the data were analyzed by open coding and focus coding to generate themes related to the interaction between social organizations and government. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, throughout the data analysis process, first, our team members met regularly to discuss our data interpretations, develop a coding scheme, and reach a consensus concerning
the application of the codes to qualitative data to enhance intercoder reliability (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020). Second, to improve the trustworthiness of the data analysis, we continually compared incidents with other incidents, incidents with themes, and themes with other themes and refined and modified the coding scheme throughout the coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The major themes included the social participation of social organizations, types of policy networks, administrative dependence and accountability, and political trust and support. Third, we applied the strategy of member checking—sending our analyses to participants and inviting them to verify the accuracy of our interpretation and presentation of their subjective reports (Koelsch, 2013).

To ensure that research ethics were maintained, before the study, we explained the research purpose, procedure, potential risks and benefits, and participants’ rights with respect to the study and obtained their consent to ensure that their participation was voluntary. Moreover, we ensured that access to all information collected was restricted to the research team for research purposes and did not disclose any information concerning participants that could indicate their identity in the transcripts and final reports. Additionally, as Mero-Jaffe (2011) suggested, we invited participants to communicate to us whether their identities might be released in our manuscript and which information might lead to feelings of anxiety if it were to be displayed to the public during the process of member checking. Next, we deleted that information or revised those parts to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Results

Social participation and policy networks

According to our findings, there were two types of social participation—policy participation and compensative participation—in education governance among the four social organizations, and these forms of social participation may imply different policy networks, including advisory and philanthropic networks.

Policy participation and advisory networks

The Beijing Think Tank and the China Education Association were typical examples of policy participation involving engagement in the policy consultation process. According to our findings, the Beijing Think Tank actively provided education policy advice to the PRC government. The Think Tank regularly conducted policy studies and then submitted consultation reports to the PRC government at different levels for purposes of education policy advocacy. For instance, according to its 2019 Annual Report, from 2010 to 2015, it prepared and submitted 110 consultation reports to the CPC Central Committee, State Council, NPC Standing Committee, National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Ministry of Education (MOE), and Ministry of Finance. Of these reports, per the Annual Report, 50 reports were translated into educational policy proposals discussed in the NPC and CPPCC, and the policy advice of 80 reports was adopted and enacted by the government at different levels. Moreover, the PRC government occasionally invited the Beijing Think Tank to provide evidence-based policy advice regarding specific educational matters.

To maintain active policy participation, the Beijing Think Tank formed project teams to draft policy consultation reports based on different educational issues for policymakers and invited education scholars from other universities and research institutes to collaborate with its staff. Two types of collaboration were employed. First, education scholars acted as consultants who provided comments on the consultation reports prepared by the Beijing Think Tank. Based on these comments, the staff would revise and polish the reports before submitting them to the government. Second, education scholars were invited to join project teams and draft the consultation reports alongside the Beijing Think Tank. According to a staff member of the Beijing Think Tank, collaboration with education scholars improved the quality of their work and thus increased the likelihood that their policy advice would be accepted by the government.

Although our staff has doctoral degrees and experience in policy consultation work, we are not experts in all fields of education. Therefore, we must collaborate with experts in those fields. They generally come from universities and research institutes. Because they are experts in particular fields, they can provide us with valuable and insightful suggestions on how we should approach policy concerns and what we should consider in this context. Thus, the quality of our consultation reports is excellent. That is why much of our policy advice is accepted by the government. (Dr. Chen, interview, 08/06/2020)

Similarly, the China Education Association provided policy advice by creating policy studies and consulting reports. Its website listed several projects entrusted to the association by the government, especially by the MOE and education departments at the district and municipal levels. The China Education Association provided education policy advice and recommendations. Dr. Li, the chairperson of an academic unit of the China Education Association, stated,

Sometimes the government asks us to participate in policy projects through which the government receives policy recommendations. Although we are an aca-
demic association, we are unlike a research institute that has its own academic staff. Therefore, we need to send invitations to our members and see which of them are interested in working on the assigned project every time the government calls us to participate in a project. Then, the members who express interest may form a team to complete the project. (Dr. Li, interview, 09/06/2020)

Nevertheless, engaging in governmentally entrusted policy projects was not the most significant duty of the China Education Association. According to its official website, the major purpose of the association was to provide platforms for academic and knowledge exchanges among education researchers, policymakers, and education participators and stakeholders. Therefore, it regularly organized meetings, seminars, and conferences to promote idea exchange and discussions regarding diverse educational topics. According to its 2019 Annual Report, in 2019, it organized five seminars/meetings and one national conference on various educational topics. All these seminars/meetings and conferences were open to the public so that all those interested in the topics could participate. Dr. Li (interview, 09/06/2020) mentioned that her academic unit of the China Education Association held a meeting concerning early childhood education legislation on a Saturday in June 2020. During that meeting, kindergarten headmasters and teachers, government officials, and scholars working in early childhood education and education legislation discussed their views concerning the challenges and future directions of early childhood education legislation. Moreover, the China Education Association regularly organized academic forums and seminars. These events were open to all stakeholders to promote knowledge exchange. These activities may not only have provided insights to guide the government’s policy-making, as Dr. Li suggested, but also improved educational practices to respond to policy initiatives through the exchange of knowledge among individuals rather than through policy consultation.

We are not a think tank. Think tanks aim to help policymakers make satisfactory policies, but we don’t do that. We just want to gather a group of people to share and exchange their ideas about given educational topics. The discussion may or may not be policy-relevant. But I agree that some of the discussions may be meaningful to policymakers. For instance, we may discuss the extent to which project-based learning works in Chinese classrooms. Some researchers may present their recent research, and in-service teachers may share their lived experiences in and through our events. The exchanges may induce changes in classroom practices and inform the MOE concerning how to effectively promote project-based learning.

In addition to scholarly social organizations, such as the Beijing Think Tank and the China Education Association, nonscholarly social organizations engage in policy participation. For example, Education Horizon disagreed that electricity in rural schools should be subject to commercial charges in 2004 because the total expense was considered too high for schools. Thus, this organization invited scholars, principals of rural schools, and members of the NPC and CPPCC to participate in a forum to discuss the unsettled matter several months before the NPC and CPPCC. This forum drafted proposals in collaboration with members of the NPC and CPPCC, who conveyed the proposal to their respective organizations for discussion. Finally, the PRC considered the proposal and revised its electricity charges policy for rural schools that same year.

Accordingly, social organizations may engage in policy participation by conducting studies and consultation projects to provide policy advice to the government and/or by facilitating academic and knowledge exchange to inspire the government to develop policies and/or improve educational practices to respond to policy initiatives in a positive manner. As the findings showed, social organizations attempt to mobilize different actors to work with them, leading to an advisory network that aims to produce policy advice or insights for the PRC government. To some extent, we observed that this advisory network tended to be coordinated by social organizations and included actors from academia, policymakers, and education participators and stakeholders nationwide. In and through the network, social organizations attempted to collaborate with different actors to influence education policy decisions made by the PRC government.

Compensative participation and philanthropic networks

Education Horizon and IRD are examples of compensative participation pertaining to poverty alleviation through education conducted by philanthropic organizations and charities. These two educational philanthropic organizations provided voluntary and charitable services to support educational development in rural areas, such as school building, fundraising, and free teacher training. In addition to independently operating, they attempted to collaborate with heterogeneous actors from different sectors to provide a range of charitable works and services to local communities, leading to policy networks that we termed philanthropic networks aimed at accomplishing philanthropic activities.

In 2010, the IRD, for example, initiated the School Health Centre Program, which has aimed to raise health awareness among students and adults, develop a set of sustainable work patterns for the promotion of sanitation, and encourage the active improvement of sanitation in primary schools in Beijing County. To achieve these aims, the IRD asked a business to sponsor the program, invited health professionals to
provide training for schools, recruited the general public to become volunteers to assist the program, and invited government officials in the county to be board members for the program and oversee the program’s operations. Through this philanthropic network, the IRD is able to efficiently promote school health education in the county and effectively improve the health awareness of students and teachers.

Because educational philanthropic organizations tend to have advantages with respect to efficiently mobilizing different actors for charitable work and services at the local level, local governments were willing to collaborate with them. Sometimes, local governments approach them for collaboration on the government’s initiative. For example, local governments asked Education Horizon and the IRD to organize fundraising for rural primary school campus renewal. In response, the two organizations arranged fundraising for and coordinated these renewal projects. Mr. Zhang, the founder of Education Horizon, perceived that the local government was willing to collaborate with them not only because of their ability to mobilize but also to leverage their understanding of the local community’s needs.

You know, we have done a lot of work for rural communities so we may know their real needs better than the local governments. I don’t mean that the local governments know nothing, but you know the governments tend to think macroscopically. Thus, their planning may not necessarily fit everyone’s needs. Thus, the governments would like to work with us. They may give us an idea, and then we enact it to fit the needs of people in the communities. (Mr. Zhang, interview, 15/06/2020)

Administrative dependence and accountability

Our findings suggest that social organizations often deal with redundant institutions and numerous regulations, leading them to become administratively dependent on and accountable to the government. In general, their daily operations are regularly monitored and supervised by government actors. For example, the IRD staff (interview, 15/04/2020) mentioned that the IRD had been monitored by the county and provincial governments. The staff claimed that the Department of Education of Hunan Province was concerned about their activities in the county because it regularly requested them to report on their duties. Thus, they had to complete a lot of paperwork to document their activities for review by the department.

Notably, administrative dependence and accountability have been legitimized by a two-tier registration and management system introduced by the “Regulations on Registration Management of Social Organizations” and the “Regulations on Registration Management of Private Non-Enterprise Units” in 1998, the “Regulations on Foundations Management” in 2004, and the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Administration of Activities of Overseas Non-governmental Organizations in the Mainland of China” in 2017. According to these regulations and laws, all forms of social organization in China must find a sponsor, which is a government agency responsible for directly monitoring and supervising NGOs’ operations, and then register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA) or an appropriate civil department as a registration management agency from the county level upward. If the sponsor or registration management agency perceives that these social organizations are disobeying regulations and laws and/or endangering national security or unity, they are disbanded. To ensure that the operations of registered social organizations are in line with regulations and the law, social organizations must submit the following to their sponsors before December 31: an annual plan of their activities for the forthcoming year and the same plan to the registration management agency within 10 days after approval by the sponsoring unit. Moreover, they must submit to the sponsoring unit an annual work report, including an audited financial report, details regarding activities and personnel or organizational changes, and a discussion of the previous year’s work, on January 31. After receiving comments from the sponsor, they must send the same annual report to the registration management agency before March 31 for an annual inspection. Thus, social organizations are accountable directly to the PRC government. Therefore, the four social organization cases referenced in this study are registered with the MOCA and supervised by a sponsor under existing regulations and the law. The sponsors of the Beijing Think Tank, the China Education Association, Education Horizon, and the IRD are a patriotic political party that was the third largest party supporting the leadership of the CPC in the NPC Standing Committee, the MOE, the MOCA, and the Department of Education of Hunan Province, respectively.

To some extent, administrative dependence and accountability may entail extra-administrative burdens on social organizations, making it difficult for them to focus on their work, as Dr. Chan, a founder of the IRD, suggested,

Sometimes, it makes me feel … we can’t concentrate on working for needy people because we must focus on preparing for inspections. Sometimes, you may be worried about whether your work may not satisfy the government because you may not be able to do anything if the government is dissatisfied about your work. (Dr. Chan, interview, 02/06/2020)

Moreover, administrative dependence and accountability may affect the professional autonomy of social organizations. According to Prof. Li (interview, 09/06/2020), the PRC has intervened in many of the China Education
Association’s activities, such as member recruitment, administration, and personnel changes. For example, she said that the government sometimes recommends retired government officials for leadership positions within the association or assigns them to those roles. Because retired officials are bureaucrats and not academic researchers, they tend to manage the association with a strict bureaucratic style that might conflict with the need for academic autonomy among the members of the association. Thus, Prof. Li claims that bureaucratic management might discourage the association from conducting scholarly activities and hosting events to promote the exchange of knowledge.

Mr. Zhang (interview, 15/06/2020) further suggested that administrative dependence and accountability might constrain the development of social organizations. His experience led him to posit that excessive dependence on and accountability to the government makes developing social organizations difficult because they may lose sight of their mission and eventually become submissive organizations that only mechanically implement the government’s fixed ideas.

### Political trust and support

Despite administrative dependence on and accountability to the government, social organizations may employ their administrative dependence and accountability to gain further political trust and support from the government. To some extent, as the literature implies, when social organizations depend on and cooperate with the government, the government may view social organizations as loyal and patriotic and thus welcome their social participation (Teets, 2018). Continual interactions with officials increase the ease with which social organizations develop relationships (guanxi) with the government (Fulda et al., 2012; Teets, 2018). According to the literature (Fulda et al., 2012; Liu, 2015; Teets, 2018), relationships with the government can help social organizations gain political trust and government support. In Chinese culture, individuals are inclined to favor those with whom they have relationships, such as acquaintances or quasi-family members (Yang, 2009). Thus, relationships may improve the trust among individuals and lead to favor-giving behaviors (Hwang, 1987). According to Yang (2020), relationships also play an important role in the Chinese governance process. The literature has shown that the better a social organization’s relationship with the government, the more the government tends to trust them, for example, listening to their opinions and providing political support for their work in China (Deng, 2010; Teets, 2018). We support this view. As Dr. Wong commented,

In Baojing, we [the IRD] are free. It doesn’t mean we do not need to follow rules and regulations. But we can actually do many things because officials of the county government give us green lights. They trust us. For example, we have trained primary schoolteachers to teach physiology and social studies with Hong Kong curricula and pedagogy, which can be ideologically different from those of the mainland. But they don’t ban it. You know, they can do so. This is their right. But it never happens because they trust us, I think. (Dr. Wong, interview, 02/06/2020)

Similarly, Mr. Zhang (interview, 15/06/2020) pointed out that Education Horizon could invite members of the NPC and CPPCC to discuss the aforementioned electricity charge issue and convince them to accept the organization’s proposal because of its relationship with the patriotic political party.

In addition to administrative dependence and accountability, the literature suggests that social organizations may use other strategies to gain political trust and support from the government, such as helping governments achieve their objectives and demonstrating the expertise and professionalism of such organizations in a policy area (Fulda et al., 2012; Teets, 2018; Zheng et al., 2010). Similar findings have been observed by Education Horizon and the IRD. For example, the State Council issued “Opinions of the PRC Central Committee and the State Council on Deepening the Reform of the Medical and Health Care System” (hereafter the Opinions), which aimed to reduce disparities between urban and rural areas in the medical and public health systems by requiring that local governments provide charitable medical services, promote the provision of charity through social organizations, and donate to medical organizations. At that time, the IRD proposed that the Baojing government repurpose a hospital into a charitable hospital to provide quality health education and medical care to disadvantaged individuals. This hospital was completed in 2014. The project not only improved the medical care of the county but also won international awards, such as the WA Social Equality Award for Chinese Architecture in 2014, the Curry Stone Design Prize of the Chicago Architecture Biennial in 2015, and the Award for International Excellence of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 2016. The county government then took credit for the project to show its merit with respect to enacting one of the requirements stated in the Opinions—to mobilize charities to provide high-quality charitable medical services in rural areas—to its supervisors. Since then, the local government’s trust in and support for the IRD has increased.

This is good because of the win–win situation. If we help the government to meet key performance indicators, the government will know we support its work, right? So, it is a good thing. Our work will go much more smoothly. It’ll be easier for us to do what we want to do in the long run. (Dr. Wang, 02/06/2020)
We do really hope that we can do something to make a difference. However, as a small NGO, the major challenge to us is space. If our work can benefit the local government in return for gaining their trust, leading to more green lights, why not? (Dr. Chan, 02/06/2020)

Discussion

The PRC government has promoted education governance reform in the spirit of social governance to increase social participation by nonstate actors in public affairs. From the perspective of network governance, education governance reform implies a shift from government to governance. That is, the PRC government wants to steer the education system in and through policy networks featuring heterarchical and democratic collaboration with diverse nonstate actors from civil society. Indeed, this study finds that there are different means (e.g., policy and compensative approaches) for social organizations to participate in education governance and that their social participation may generate different types of policy networks (e.g., advisory and philanthropic networks). The findings imply that the PRC government may be another type of actor participating in policy networks and may collaborate with other actors to steer the educational system. For example, the government may listen to policy advice provided by the Beijing Think Tank when designing education policy, promote educational innovations through academic events organized by the China Education Association, and enact policies through charitable work performed by the Education Horizon and the IRD. Therefore, a collaborative relationship between the PRC government and social organizations may exist in the context of education governance.

Nevertheless, this collaborative relationship does not imply that this approach is a mode of network governance that can be characterized as steering society in and through heterarchical and independent relationships and that features mutual trust among heterogeneous actors in policy networks (Osborne, 2010). As our findings show, the PRC government enforces numerous rules, regulations, and laws with respect to the operations of social organizations, causing them to be administratively subordinate to the PRC government. In this situation, social organizations must be submissive and accountable to the PRC government (Teets, 2018). Therefore, Chinese education governance may value administrative hierarchy and dependence rather than heterarchy and independence between state and nonstate actors. However, as Chan (2019) and Tao and Liu (2020) have suggested, this situation does not entail that nonstate actors are powerless in the process of education governance. According to the findings of this study, social organizations may enjoy the freedom to accomplish their work if they gain political trust and support from the government. However, because social organizations are unlike public institutions organized and led by state organs, they must proactively win the government’s political trust and support via various strategies (Fulda et al., 2012; Liu, 2015; Teets, 2018; Zheng et al., 2010). In other words, political trust and support are important factors shaping the social participation of social organizations in Chinese education governance and their interactions with state actors in the context of network governance in China.

This article suggests that Chinese education governance has a mixed mode of government, comprising the bureaucratic and top-down governing capacities of the state over society (Katsamunksa, 2016), and governance, associated with collaboration between state and nonstate actors to steer society (Kennett, 2010). On the one hand, the PRC government attempts to use a network approach to steer the educational system; on the other hand, it maintains its supremacy over social organizations, leading to hierarchical and submissive rather than heterarchical and independent policy networks. Thus, Chinese education governance in the spirit of social governance may be more accurately referred to as network government, which is the application of the network approach to governance to emphasize and strengthen Party-state leadership and control over nonstate actors in the policy process instead of network governance per se.

According to Edwards et al. (2021), policy networks and nonstate actors should “function within the pre-existing structures” (p. 1222) and “contribute to the reconfiguration of the State” (p. 1223). Therefore, to understand why network government is used rather than network governance, as Yang (2020) noted, considering the structure of the state, especially the political and ideological system of China, is required. According to Li (2015) and Tsang (2009), the contemporary Chinese political system is influenced by socialism; neo-authoritarianism, which emphasizes an enlightened autocracy in which a strong leader adopts undemocratic measures to enforce social development; and consultative Leninism, which underlines the supremacy of the Party to consult the masses for making policies. These two political ideologies shape the behavior of the PRC government with respect to emphasizing a strong but enlightened Party-state leadership to sustain social and economic solidarity, well-being, and development. Therefore, the government strategically allows or invites citizens whom it trusts to endeavor to develop policies that facilitate the achievement of political goals (Tsang, 2009). In other words, the spirit of social governance promoted by the PRC government emphasizes social participation under Party-state leadership and domination based on socialist rule of law rather than on a heterarchical and independent relationship with mutual trust observed between the PRC government and social organizations (Yang et al., 2016). As Mok et al. (2021) noted and as the findings of this study imply, this mode of governance
tends to discourage social organizations from engaging in equal, liberal negotiation processes with state actors, subjecting the former to political rather than neoliberal surveillance and restricting their power to challenge and change existing power relationships in society, although they are allowed to participate in education policy processes. As a result, the form of social participation of social organizations in China is pragmatic-instrumental rather than liberal, neoliberal, or progressive (Mok et al., 2021). According to Mok et al. (2021), the pragmatic-instrumental form of social participation perceives nonstate actors as tools for solving problems, implementing policies, and/or strengthening the state’s governing capabilities rather than as partners in cogovernance alongside the PRC government with respect to social governance. In this sense, the PRC government may not only view social participation in education governance as a strategy of what Weiler (1983) calls compensatory legitimation but as a pragmatic-instrumental strategy to place social organizations in a supplementary, subordinate role with respect to the policy process for problem-solving or strengthening the state’s governing capabilities from the top down (Mok et al., 2021).

Accordingly, this study makes two contributions to the literature. First, it extends the network governance perspective to societies other than Western liberal and democratic societies. Because this perspective was developed in the context of Western liberal and democratic societies and used to explain governance patterns in those societies, the unconditional application of this perspective may not accurately explain or may distort the governance patterns operative in other societies. The results of this investigation of education governance in China imply that societies other than Western liberal, democratic societies may also apply a network approach to steer society, as the network governance perspective predicts. Nevertheless, unlike the network governance adopted in Western liberal, democratic societies, the network approach of governance may be used in these contexts in a pragmatic-instrumental manner to assist the state in solving problems or strengthening the state’s governing capabilities from the top down. Therefore, this study proposes that network government may be an alternative concept or framework to describe and explain governance patterns in such societies. Second, this study advances the understanding of Chinese education governance. Following Edwards and Klees (2015), this study considers the structure of the state, especially the political and ideological system of China, and finds that Chinese education governance is supported by political ideologies, such as neo-authoritarianism and consultative Leninism, that emphasize structural and institutional monitoring and supervision over social organizations and nonstate actors in general, operating with and through policy networks to strengthen the state’s governing capabilities from the top down. Thus, Chinese education governance tends to require social organizations to be administratively dependent on and accountable to the PRC government and to gain political trust and support from the government if they want to attain a certain degree of autonomy and influence on policy processes.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. First, we did not investigate state actors. Therefore, only the perspectives of social organizations and their actors were considered. Because education governance involves both parties, this exclusion of state actors’ perspectives may have resulted in an incomplete picture of Chinese education governance. Thus, future studies should investigate state actors at different levels to generate a more comprehensive analysis of how social organizations participate in Chinese education governance and interact with state actors in and through policy networks in China that has been presented in this study. Second, because a qualitative case study was conducted in this study, the research findings are not statistically generalizable. Therefore, conducting additional case studies to achieve analytic generalizability by replicating the study with additional cases until saturation is recommended (Yin, 2003). Accordingly, future research should continue to investigate social organizations and/or nonstate actors with different characteristics, for example, nature, background, and size, to verify and modify the understanding of Chinese education governance until saturation.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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