Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

SIYI CHENG

BA (East China Normal University, 2016)

“Student Engagement with Institutional Governance in Contemporary Chinese Universities: An Internationalization Process”

Department of Pacific and Asian Studies

Friday, August 2, 2019
2:00 P.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B007

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Andrew Marton, Department of Pacific and Asian Studies, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Tatiana Gounko, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Catherine McGregor, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Myer Horowitz, Department of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
In recent decades, China has stood out for its active social experiment with its state market relations and educational reforms to build internationally competitive universities. Students, as recipients of and participants in these changes, showed stakeholder awareness, subjectivity, and agency in navigating the Chinese university system, but their influence on university decision-making was unclear. Informed by a theoretical framework that incorporated the study of higher education internationalization, the associated concepts of student engagement, and a social, cultural, and institutional examination of the global-local interactions, this study explored student engagement with institutional governance in Chinese universities. Grounded in an interpretivist perspective, the research employed qualitative methods to unpack students’ knowledge construction, referential framework, and constant negotiation. Research questions addressed action patterns, conceptual rationales, and the deciding powers in student engagement. This research provided a contextual analysis of policy practices, individual student experiences, and the possible impact on the international outlook of Chinese higher education.

Findings pinpointed overarching power relations within the institutional foundations of Chinese university structures, as they were highly intertwined with the university’s political priorities to create a neutral and stable campus. This is evident in the monopoly of the Communist Youth League in student activities, the institutionalization of student leadership, and the daily supervision of student counsellors. While the students were invited to participate in the peripheral structure of university governance, this structure in turn assimilated student voices and dissolved student unrest in the process. In the meantime, the investigation found informal interactions inspired sporadic student actions in spaces with lower level institutionalization to push against the administrative boundaries. Students demonstrated an exceptional understanding of the university power relations and their ability to act purposefully and strategically.

Despite substantive internationalization efforts of Chinese HEIs, the analysis did not suggest internationalization had a direct significant connection with student engagement in Chinese university governance. Nonetheless, Western influences on current student-university interactions were manifested in the use of instructional models, the increased use of the
English language, and a vision shaped by external knowledge towards more progressive campuses.

The significance of this thesis is both scholarly and practical. This study identified the realities of Chinese higher education and the paucity of academic discussion on student experience in Chinese universities. This research responded to the challenge of accommodating an understanding of the non-Anglo-Saxon experience with student engagement in mainstream theories developed largely in Western contexts. For policymakers and educators, the thesis highlighted the under-explored political dimensions of internationalization and the conditions for meaningful learning and engagement.