

Research on the Construction of Institutional System for Non-Party Representatives in Higher Education Institutions in the New Era

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Abstract

Why do some universities manage to cultivate non-Party representatives effectively while others struggle despite years of effort? The answer, we argue, lies less in individual talent than in the institutional scaffolding—or its absence—that either enables or constrains collective action. Starting from this puzzle, we trace the theoretical lineage of the problem back to Marxist united front thought as it has been adapted to Chinese conditions, and supplement it with a systems-science lens to capture how normative components interact. The empirical picture that emerges is sobering: perception gaps persist among university leadership, regulatory texts remain scattered and sometimes contradictory, departments operate in silos, training programmes default to one-size-fits-all templates, platform channels have dulled, and feedback loops from evaluation back to practice are either weak or missing entirely. We respond to these findings not with a single silver-bullet reform but with a layered architecture of norms—anchored in unified Party committee leadership and radiating outward through six interlocking sub-systems—paired with five improvement directions that range from strategic planning to digital enablement. The hope is that this framework, while necessarily general, can serve both as a diagnostic tool and as a practical reference for scholars and practitioners working in the field.

Keywords

New era; higher education institutions; non-Party representatives; normative construction; united front; new-type political party system.

1. Introduction

Throughout its century-long history, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has relied on the united front as a core strategy for rallying consensus and pooling resources. Today, as domestic and international conditions shift in fundamental ways, united front work in the new era faces a new landscape of challenges and opportunities. A Reader on Studying General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Thought on Excellently Carrying Out the Party's United Front Work in the New Era lays out the theoretical essence and practical orientation of this thought in detail, setting the direction for the united front cause at its current stage [1]. For higher education institutions, the question is pressing: how to strengthen the development of non-Party representative teams and make fuller use of the energies that non-Party intellectuals bring to the table.

Universities are home to large numbers of non-Party intellectuals—scholars with deep expertise, considerable academic standing, and broad social connections. Their contributions to the modernization of national governance are hard to replicate through other channels. On

the political front, reinforcing this group's development ties closely into the consolidation of multi-party cooperation and political consultation under CPC leadership, and by extension, into the broader push for socialist democratic politics.

Questions of institutional design carry foundational weight here. Wang Xiaolong has argued that strengthening the institutional development of non-Party representative teams is not just an endogenous requirement flowing from CPC Central Committee decisions; it also serves as a structural guarantee for raising the scientific quality of related work [11]. But there is a gap between aspiration and reality. At many universities, institutional development remains patchwork—regulations exist in isolation, integration among them is thin, and shortfalls in coordination are pronounced. Viewed against the broader united front work pattern, the challenge of advancing this agenda through institutional standardization calls for sustained, in-depth inquiry.

A governance lens adds further perspective. He Jian and colleagues maintain that strengthening relevant institutions is an intrinsic demand of governance modernization, one that requires careful planning at the normative level [10]. Along similar lines, Ke Jian identifies institutional development as a key operational element [13]. Building on these considerations, the present study adopts an integrated methodology blending literature analysis with systems analysis. After reviewing theoretical foundations and historical evolution, we examine the practical challenges at hand, attempt to sketch a fairly detailed institutional framework, and put forward corresponding pathways for improvement.

2. Theoretical Foundations of the Institutional System for Non-Party Representative Team Development in Higher Education Institutions

2.1. The Sinicization of Marxist United Front Theory

We find it useful to begin not with a chronology but with an observation: the single thread running through every major phase of the CPC's united front practice is the insistence that Marxist theory must be reworked—sometimes stretched, sometimes fundamentally reimagined—to fit concrete Chinese realities. Mao's formulation of "uniting all forces that can be united" during the revolutionary period was not a quotation from a textbook; it was a pragmatic response to the problem of how a numerically small party could prevail against better-resourced adversaries. Deng's revival of the united front as a "magic weapon" after 1978 served a different conjuncture but followed the same logic of adaptation. What we see in the new era, then, is less a departure from precedent than an intensification of it.

The "five relationships" framework—balancing the core against consensus, latent achievements against visible ones, principle against flexibility, unity against struggle, strategy against tactics—represents the most recent effort to systematize this adaptive impulse [1]. For our purposes, what matters is how this framework lands in higher education. The principal addressees of united front work on campus are non-Party intellectuals; building their ranks is not ancillary but foundational.

It is also worth noting the contribution of the new-type political party system—multi-party cooperation and political consultation under CPC leadership—as a distinctive institutional embodiment of this theory. Zhou Qiangwei has unpacked the historical, theoretical, and practical logics from which the system arose, drawing attention to what makes it specifically Chinese rather than derivative of any generic coalition model [8]. Wang Xiaohong makes a related point: without a steady pipeline of non-Party representatives, multi-party cooperation risks becoming a framework without actors [15]. These arguments, taken together, give us the theoretical grounding for asking what institutional system construction should look like.

2.2. Methodological Insights from Systems Science Theory

A recurring mistake in normative construction is treating it as an exercise in accumulation—drafting more regulations, stacking one policy document on top of another—without asking whether the pieces actually connect. Systems science provides a corrective here. As Wei Hongsen and Zeng Guoping put it, a system's overall function exceeds the sum of its parts, and the difference is made by the quality of internal linkages rather than by the quantity of components [3]. The implication for our topic is direct: a normative system for non-Party representative development should be judged less by how many rules exist and more by how well those rules talk to each other.

We also draw on Haken's synergetics, though with a degree of caution. Haken's core insight—that cooperative behaviour among subsystems can spontaneously generate ordered structures under the right conditions [2]—maps reasonably well onto normative construction if one is careful not to overstretch the analogy. In our context, the "subsystems" are the functional stages (identification, cultivation, recommendation, appointment, management, evaluation), and the "order parameter" is the degree to which these stages feed into one another rather than operating independently. Identification produces candidates; cultivation prepares them; recommendation and appointment give them a stage; management and supervision generate performance data; evaluation loops back to recalibrate identification. The logic is circular, not linear.

From this vantage point, four properties of the normative framework deserve mention—though we hesitate to present them as a tidy taxonomy, since in practice they bleed into one another. The system must hold together as a whole (all norms point toward team development as a shared goal). It must accommodate internal differentiation (core norms sit above basic norms, which sit above operational rules). It must remain open to shifts in the external policy environment. And it must be capable of recalibrating itself as conditions change. These are not checkboxes; they are tensions that require ongoing management.

2.3. Theoretical Connotations of the New-Type Political Party System

Perhaps the most natural starting point for thinking about normative system construction is to ask: what is the system actually for? The new-type political party system exists, among other things, to create structured channels through which non-Party members can participate in governance—deliberating on state affairs, exercising democratic supervision, engaging in political consultation. Liu Tiantian has described these channels as one of the system's distinctive strengths [4]. The question we want to press is whether those channels are adequately equipped at the institutional level to handle the traffic that passes through them.

Fan Shibo and colleagues offer a useful angle when they argue that supervision under this system is constructive in character—premised on shared political foundations rather than adversarial confrontation [5]. This matters for institutional design because it means that norms governing democratic supervision in universities cannot simply be copied from oversight mechanisms designed for a different purpose; they need to reflect the cooperative, rather than oppositional, logic of the system itself.

The sixteen-character policy—"long-term coexistence, mutual supervision, treating each other with sincerity, and sharing weal or woe"—is sometimes treated as rhetorical decoration. We think it carries more substantive weight than is typically assumed. It sets boundaries: Party leadership and respect for non-Party members' principal status are not in tension but coexist; political guidance and democratic consultation are not alternatives but complements; management and individual space are not zero-sum. Normative construction that ignores these paired commitments risks sliding either toward excessive control or toward drift.

2.4. Clarification of Core Concepts

Before proceeding further, we need to be precise about what we are talking about—though we confess that definition-drawing is always somewhat arbitrary, and the boundaries of these concepts are inevitably porous.

By "non-Party representatives in higher education institutions," we mean intellectuals who are not CPC members, work in universities, and have achieved enough professional standing and social recognition to speak on behalf of broader constituencies. The label covers a heterogeneous group: democratic party members, non-affiliated individuals, non-Party intellectuals, overseas returnees. What they share is depth of expertise—typically in research or teaching—and a degree of representational legitimacy. Fan Nanxi and colleagues, drawing on fieldwork in Shaanxi, suggest that identifying such individuals requires looking across political quality, professional competence, and social influence simultaneously [6], which seems right, though the relative weighting of these dimensions will vary by context.

The "normative system for team development" is our shorthand for the interconnected set of rules, mechanisms, and safeguards that govern the full lifecycle of non-Party representative development. It is not a single document but an ecosystem of norms. Yang Feifei describes standardization as the process of codifying successful practice into stable, repeatable forms [9]—a description we find helpful because it implies that norms should emerge from experience rather than being imposed from above. Wang Shun'an adds that cooperative norms need to be established across the entire chain from identification through management [12].

For the purposes of this paper, we define the "normative system for non-Party representative team development in higher education institutions" as the set of mutually reinforcing norms—established under the leadership of the university Party committee—governing identification and reservation, education and cultivation, recommendation and appointment, management and supervision, service and guarantee, and evaluation and assessment. The reader will note that we are not claiming originality for this definition; rather, we are synthesizing existing scholarly usage in a way that sets up the analysis to follow.

3. Historical Evolution of the Institutional System for Non-Party Representative Team Development in Higher Education Institutions

3.1. Normative Exploration in the Early Period of the People's Republic of China

Work among non-Party representatives in higher education has tracked closely with the trajectory of the Party's united front policies. At the founding of the People's Republic, considerable emphasis was placed on enlisting non-Party intellectuals in national construction. Non-Party members in universities channeled their participation primarily through the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the Government Affairs Committee. The year 1956 marked a notable turning point: Mao Zedong's articulation of "long-term coexistence and mutual supervision" opened policy space for democratic parties and non-affiliated individuals on campus. That momentum, however, proved fragile. The subsequent expansion of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution brought united front work to a virtual standstill.

3.2. Normative Restoration and Development after Reform and Opening-Up

With reform and opening-up, united front work was restored to its proper course. Deng Xiaoping's 1979 reaffirmation of the united front as an "important magic weapon" set the tone. A key moment followed in 1989, when the Opinions of the CPC Central Committee on Upholding and Improving the System of Multi-Party Cooperation and Political Consultation under the Leadership of the CPC was promulgated, ushering the new-type political party system into a

fresh phase of normative maturation. Universities moved to restore—or establish anew—their united front work departments, and relevant norms gradually took shape.

The turn of the new century brought a marked acceleration in standardization. In 2000, the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee issued the Opinions on Strengthening the Development of Non-Party Representative Teams in the New Era, the first document to deploy this work in a focused fashion. Follow-up Central Committee documents appeared in 2004 and 2012. The latter was especially significant: for the first time, the CPC Central Committee made a dedicated deployment on non-Party representative team development, signaling the entry of this field into a more advanced stage of standardization. Gong Jimin identifies the construction of a scientific evaluation system as one important milestone in this process [14]. It was also during this period that many universities began assembling information databases for non-Party representatives and piloting early-stage evaluation mechanisms.

3.3. Requirements for Normative Improvement in the New Era

The promulgation of the Regulations on the United Front Work of the CPC (Trial) in 2015—formally implemented upon revision in 2020—supplied broad normative guidance in the form of intra-Party regulations, with explicit requirements bearing on non-Party representative team development. He Jian and Gong Xianzhou contend that addressing persistent problems—fragmentation, imperfect mechanisms—demands solutions at the normative level [10].

The new stage places demanding requirements on normative construction across multiple axes. Building a complete normative chain calls for coverage of the entire process. Precision demands differentiated provisions calibrated to different types and levels of representatives. Effectiveness requires that norms translate into genuine practice rather than remain on paper. Innovation calls for designs that adapt to emerging circumstances without losing their grounding. Hou Xiaoyan, studying non-affiliated individuals, observes that problems such as imperfect norms and obstructed channels continue to afflict liaison and management [7]. Such problems are no less present in higher education, underscoring the urgency of systematic normative remedies.

4. Practical Challenges Facing the Institutional System for Non-Party Representative Team Development in Higher Education Institutions in the New Era

4.1. Cognitive Distortions in Perception

Action is only as sound as the thinking that precedes it. Survey evidence indicates that some universities display insufficient appreciation of the importance of non-Party representative team development, manifesting several recognizable cognitive distortions. One school of thought holds that the central mission of a university is teaching and research, and that work touching on non-Party members falls squarely within the remit of united front departments—hardly relevant to institutional development at large. Another tendency minimizes the need for institutional scaffolding, assuming that non-Party representatives will develop through personal effort alone. A third pattern is episodic attentiveness: attaching importance only when political arrangement needs surface, while neglecting long-range planning.

These cognitive gaps strike directly at the motivation for normative construction. Even where universities have enacted norms, implementation risks becoming a performative exercise, sharply curtailing normative efficacy. At root, the problem often traces back to an incomplete grasp—among certain leading cadres—of united front theory and the functions of the new-type political party system [8].

4.2. Fragmentation of Normative Supply

Normative construction within universities today bears the mark of fragmentation. Many institutions have yet to move beyond isolated, ad hoc regulations; an integrated design remains elusive. The symptoms present themselves along several fronts.

Norms governing critical operational stages tend to function in silos, with information sharing and operational coordination falling well short of what is needed. Candidate lists generated during identification and reservation, for instance, may never reach the cultivation stage in a timely fashion, producing a disconnect between cultivation outcomes and appointment recommendations. Meanwhile, the hierarchical ordering of norms—core norms, basic norms, operational rules—lacks clear definition. Gaps in normative supply persist in certain critical areas: exit mechanisms and dynamic adjustment mechanisms, to cite two notable examples, have yet to be established.

Yang Feifei points out that normative fragmentation saps normative synergy, making it difficult to accumulate normative advantage [9]. The internal governance structure of universities—marked by multiple departments and layered hierarchies—only deepens the challenge of coordination and integration.

4.3. Inadequacy of Inter-Departmental Coordination

Developing non-Party representative teams in higher education necessarily involves a web of departments: united front, organization, human resources, academic affairs, scientific research, and individual faculties. The difficulty is that inter-departmental coordination and collaboration remain conspicuously weak in practice. United front departments bear the coordinating mandate, yet frequently operate under constraints of scarce resources and limited convening power. Information hoarding and operational disconnects across departments are hardly exceptional—they are, in many settings, the norm.

Synergetics teaches that synergy is the critical mechanism through which a system transitions from disorder to order [2]. At present, no effective synergy mechanism binds departments together; each unit proceeds on its own trajectory, yielding inefficient resource allocation. Human resources departments may hold data on high-level non-Party talent that never reaches the united front department. Academic affairs may schedule teaching loads without factoring in the particular demands that non-Party representatives face in participating in social services.

4.4. Homogenization of Cultivation and Education

If cultivation and education form the heart of team development, then current practice reveals a troubling lack of precision. Training content defaults to a one-size-fits-all model, subjecting representatives of disparate disciplinary backgrounds and career stages to identical programs. Delivery methods, too, skew monotonous—heavy on theoretical study and classroom instruction, thin on practical training and temporary position assignments. Political training and professional development run on parallel tracks that rarely intersect, perpetuating what might be called a "dual disconnect."

Fan Nanxi and colleagues have identified unclear cultivation objectives and undifferentiated methods as significant constraints on effectiveness [6]. At some universities, the absence of long-range planning is palpable: the practice of "training only when the need arises"—or worse, scrambling at the last minute—remains all too common, precluding sustained developmental gains.

4.5. Weakening of Platform Functions

Providing platforms through which non-Party representatives can make meaningful contributions ranks among the central aims of team development. Shortcomings here are hard to overlook. When it comes to participation in the deliberation and administration of state

affairs, representatives find their channels for engaging in democratic management and supervision within universities narrowly circumscribed, with limited influence on major decision-making. Social service platforms and channels for contributing to local economic and social development remain insufficiently accessible. And in academic exchange, the scholarly profile of non-Party representatives—particularly democratic party members—still has considerable room to grow.

Wang Shun'an observes that norms for cooperative collaboration should be strengthened on multiple fronts: consultative norms for participation in major decision-making, norms for democratic supervision, and norms governing the feedback loop on opinions and suggestions [12]. In universities, normative construction across these domains lags behind, failing to furnish adequate guarantees for representatives seeking to discharge their roles.

4.6. Deficiencies in the Evaluation System

Evaluation and assessment function as feedback mechanisms—necessary for verifying work effectiveness and fine-tuning normative operation. Yet the evaluation systems currently in place across universities display notable weaknesses. Criteria remain insufficiently defined, lacking standards that blend quantification with nuance for assessing political quality and capacity for political participation. Methods still lean heavily toward qualitative judgment, with quantitative assessment underdeveloped and evaluator pools relatively narrow. Worse still, the utilization of evaluation findings is thin: linkage to cultivation, recommendation, and appointment processes is tenuous at best.

Gong Jimin argues that a credible evaluation system should address objectives, standards, methods, and application of results in an integrated fashion, forming a complete closed loop [14]. University-level explorations, however, remain at a comparatively early stage; a mature, widely replicable evaluation model has yet to emerge.

5. Systematic Composition of the Institutional System for Non-Party Representative Team Development in Higher Education Institutions in the New Era

Informed by systems science theory, the normative system for non-Party representative team development in higher education ought to function as an organic whole composed of interacting sub-systems [3]. At its apex stands the core norm of unified Party committee leadership; radiating from this center are six sub-norms—identification and reservation, education and cultivation, recommendation and appointment, management and supervision, service and guarantee, and evaluation and assessment—together forming an integrated normative architecture.

5.1. Core Norm of Unified Party Committee Leadership

Unified Party committee leadership operates as both a core guarantee and a central element of the overall normative system. The core norm should spell out the primary responsibility of the university Party committee, weaving representative team development into the broader fabric of Party building and talent development strategy.

What does this look like in practice? A work pattern in which the Party committee exercises unified leadership, the united front department takes the operational lead, relevant departments each shoulder their designated responsibilities, and faculties participate actively. The Party committee secretary serves as the first responsible person; the designated supervisor, as the directly responsible person. Representative team development is incorporated into the annual assessment of the Party committee. Standing committee meetings

follow standardized procedures that include regular deliberation on this work. And a two-level responsibility system—university and faculty—ensures accountability runs from top to bottom. Ke Jian characterizes the norm of unified Party committee leadership as "the key of all keys" in normative construction [13]. Unless this requirement is translated into concrete practice, the establishment and functioning of every other norm rest on shaky ground.

5.2. Identification and Reservation Mechanism

Identification and reservation form the base of the pyramid. The shift needed here is twofold: from "passive discovery" to "proactive discovery," and from isolated, individual discovery to organized, institutionalized discovery.

An effective mechanism along these lines would include the following components: information databases for non-Party representatives, enabling dynamic management of non-Party intellectuals across campus and tiered, categorized talent reserve pools; standardized procedures for regular surveys, with faculties and departments periodically forwarding outstanding talent profiles to the united front department; multi-channel talent identification drawing on academic evaluation, social service assessment, and feedback from faculty and students; a joint discovery mechanism linking united front, organization, and human resources departments; and adjustment norms characterized by "admission and exit with dynamic management."

Fan Nanxi and colleagues recommend constructing an evaluation framework spanning political stance, academic caliber, social influence, and mass base [6]. Their recommendation carries clear reference value for building out the identification and reservation mechanism.

5.3. Education and Cultivation System

Education and cultivation exercise a direct influence on representatives' political quality and overall competence. The system should aim to integrate along three axes: political training with professional development, theoretical study with practical training, and individual effort with organizational cultivation.

Among the normative elements: tiered and categorized training norms with differentiated plans; a curriculum centered on political consensus education, with structured instruction in theoretical traditions; planned arrangements for representatives to serve in temporary positions within Party and government organs and grassroots units; a mentoring system pairing younger representatives with experienced guides; and tracking cultivation norms offering guidance throughout the developmental process.

5.4. Recommendation and Appointment Norms

Recommendation and appointment represent the critical proving ground for the effectiveness of identification and cultivation. The governing standard should be one of combining moral integrity with professional competence—moral integrity taking precedence.

Concrete measures along these lines include: clearly defining standards and procedures for recommending candidates for political positions; ensuring a designated proportion of non-Party cadres within institutional leadership; specifying channels for representatives to engage with the faculty representative congress, academic committees, and analogous bodies; recommending outstanding representatives to people's congresses, CPPCC committees, and government departments at higher levels; and actively soliciting representatives' views when major decisions are under consideration.

Liu Tiantian notes that one advantage of the new-type political party system lies in furnishing standardized channels of participation for non-Party members [4]. Fan Shibo and colleagues similarly emphasize that the supervisory function requires concrete mechanisms to become

operative [5]. Universities would do well to make full use of these channels, creating conditions for representatives to fulfill their roles.

5.5. Management and Supervision Norms

The aim of management and supervision is twofold: ensuring that representatives maintain the correct political orientation, and supporting their continuous growth in competence. The governing principle should balance firm management with genuine care.

Key normative elements include: norms for tracking political performance; performance assessment norms periodically evaluating participation in the deliberation and administration of state affairs and in social services; norms for regular heart-to-heart talks to exchange views on evolving dynamics; exit mechanisms incorporating dynamic adjustments for those who fail to meet requirements; and clearly stated disciplinary requirements and behavioral bottom lines.

Hou Xiaoyan notes that sound norms are needed to strengthen liaison and communication [7]. Within the university setting, management and supervision norms should also be integrated with academic ethics and the cultivation of professional teacher conduct.

5.6. Service and Guarantee Norms

Service and guarantee norms supply the practical support that representatives need in their work, study, and daily life—support that, in turn, stimulates motivation for productive endeavor.

These norms encompass: funding guarantees providing financial backing for research, participation in the deliberation and administration of state affairs, and social services; provision of necessary work assistants and operational conditions; opportunities for training, further study, and academic exchange; norms for leading cadres to cultivate friendships with representatives; and commending and rewarding those who demonstrate outstanding performance.

5.7. Evaluation and Assessment Norms

Evaluation and assessment form the necessary capstone for closed-loop normative operation. The approach should blend qualitative and quantitative methods, process and outcome assessments, and self-evaluation with external evaluation.

Normative elements here include: a multi-dimensional evaluation indicator system covering political quality, professional competence, capacity for participation in the deliberation and administration of state affairs, social service contributions, and mass recognition [14]; differentiated assessment standards tailored to different categories of representatives; a pluralistic mechanism combining organizational evaluation, peer evaluation, social evaluation, and self-evaluation; effective linkage of evaluation results with cultivation, recommendation, and appointment decisions; and periodic assessment of the evaluation norms themselves, with improvements enacted accordingly.

Gong Jimin emphasizes that the evaluation system should be scientific, well-organized, and operable—attending to both individual growth and overall effectiveness [14].

6. Optimization Pathways for the Institutional System of Non-Party Representative Team Development in Higher Education Institutions in the New Era

6.1. Strengthening Top-Level Planning

We begin with what we take to be an uncomfortable truth: at many universities, normative construction for non-Party representative teams has proceeded in an ad hoc fashion—driven

by immediate exigencies rather than by any coherent design. Documents are issued in response to problems as they arise; different departments produce overlapping or contradictory regulations; no one has stepped back to ask whether the whole adds up to something coherent. Our reading of the literature, and of Yang Feifei's work in particular [9], suggests that this indicates that only through well-thought-out top-level design can this pattern be corrected.

What would top-level planning actually look like? At minimum, a university would need to produce a normative construction plan—not a vague statement of intent but a document with real timelines, assigned responsibilities, and measurable milestones. Before writing new norms, someone would need to audit the existing stock: which regulations still fit current conditions, which have become dead letters, and where are the gaps? A normative review mechanism would help: any new regulation, before being issued, should pass through the united front department for a compliance check against the broader framework. And there is the structural question—norms need to be organized hierarchically, with core norms at the top, basic norms in the middle, and operational rules at the base. Too many universities have this inverted: detailed operational rules exist, but the overarching principles they are supposed to instantiate are nowhere to be found.

6.2. Improving Coordination Mechanisms

The coordination problem is, in some ways, the hardest one. It is relatively straightforward to draft a better regulation; it is much harder to get six or seven departments that have historically operated in isolation to start sharing information and acting in concert. Our analysis suggests that the difficulty is not merely technical—it is also cultural, in the sense that departmental leaders often see cooperation as optional rather than obligatory.

A joint conference mechanism, convened under Party committee leadership and attended by relevant department heads, could serve as the institutional forum where coordination is not just encouraged but required. The frequency of meetings matters less than the follow-through: decisions taken at joint conferences need to be tracked and their implementation reported. Information-sharing platforms are another piece of the puzzle, though we would caution against overestimating what technology alone can achieve. A database is only as useful as the willingness of departments to populate it honestly and access it regularly. Beyond these structural measures, there is the question of resources: training programmes, funding lines, and platform access all need to be coordinated across departmental boundaries rather than duplicated or hoarded. Finally, some form of supervision and accountability is necessary—a way of identifying departments that fail to cooperate and holding them to account. Haken's synergetics [2] and Wei Hongsen and Zeng Guoping's systems framework [3] both point in this direction: without deliberate mechanisms for generating cooperation, systems tend toward fragmentation rather than integration.

6.3. Innovating Cultivation Models

Cultivation is where the gap between aspiration and reality tends to become most visible. The standard approach—lecture-based political training, identical programmes for people at different career stages, and a near-total separation between political education and professional development—produces representatives who may be knowledgeable but are rarely well-rounded. We think the problem is less about resources than about imagination.

Our proposal is to move toward what we might call "differentiated cultivation"—development plans that actually reflect the backgrounds, strengths, and trajectories of individual representatives. A young lecturer in the natural sciences has different needs from a senior professor in the humanities who is being groomed for a CPPCC position; treating them identically is a waste of everyone's time. A "dual mentor" arrangement—one mentor for political development, another for professional growth—could help bridge the theory-practice

divide that currently runs through most training programmes. Temporary-position arrangements, both within university governance structures and in Party-government organs at the local level, offer something that classroom instruction cannot: real-world experience of how policy is made and how influence is exercised. We would also suggest experimenting with what one might term "immersive" political education—site visits, case discussions, scenario-based exercises—rather than relying exclusively on the lecture format. And there is a case for maintaining "growth portfolios" that track each representative's development over time, so that cultivation decisions are informed by evidence rather than by guesswork.

He Jian and Gong Xianzhou's argument that cultivation should develop political quality and governance capacity in tandem [10] resonates with this approach. The two dimensions are not rivals; they are mutually reinforcing.

6.4. Refining the Evaluation System

Evaluation is the part of the normative cycle that most universities handle worst—or, more precisely, handle in ways that generate more frustration than insight. The problem is not that evaluation is absent; it is that it tends to be either too vague to be useful (purely qualitative impressions) or too rigid to be fair (checkbox exercises that miss what actually matters). Gong Jimin's argument that evaluation should cover objectives, standards, methods, and application of results as an integrated whole [14] is, we think, the right starting point.

We would push further and suggest that evaluation should be understood not primarily as a judgmental exercise but as a developmental one. The purpose of evaluating a non-Party representative's performance is not to rank them but to identify where additional support or redirection might help them grow. With this orientation in mind, evaluation standards should span multiple dimensions: political quality, capacity for participation, professional contributions, social service, and grassroots connections [14]. No single dimension should dominate, and the relative weight given to each may need to differ depending on the representative's category and role. Methods should also diversify—360-degree feedback, critical incident evaluation, and peer review could all supplement the standard organizational assessment. Perhaps most important, evaluation results need to be connected to consequential decisions about cultivation direction, political recommendations, and commendation; if evaluation findings simply sit in a file and are never used, the entire exercise becomes cynical.

Wang Shun'an's insistence that cooperative norms require evaluative backing [12] applies with particular force here. An evaluation system that does not feed back into practice is not an evaluation system at all—it is a ritual.

6.5. Promoting Digital Empowerment

We acknowledge that the phrase "digital transformation" has become something of a cliché, invoked in contexts where it may not be warranted. But in this case, we believe the digital turn is genuinely relevant—not as a substitute for good normative design, but as a tool that can make good design more visible, more trackable, and more responsive.

A smart united front information platform, consolidating data on representatives from across departments, would address one of the most persistent problems identified in this paper: information fragmentation. When the united front department cannot see what human resources knows, or when academic affairs is unaware of the service commitments that a representative has taken on, the system is operating blind. Analytics tools could help identify patterns—Which cultivation programmes produce the best outcomes? Where are the bottlenecks in the identification-to-appointment pipeline?—that are currently invisible because they require cross-referencing data that no single department holds. Online training platforms would expand access to learning resources, particularly for representatives at campuses far from the main university base. Online consultation channels could broaden

participation in governance beyond the small group of representatives who happen to be physically present at meetings. And a normative operation monitoring system—tracking the performance of each functional link in real time—would give university leadership the evidence base they need to make adjustments rather than relying on anecdote or intuition.

The deeper point, though, is this: digital tools do not fix bad norms. They make good norms work better. If the underlying institutional design is flawed, digitizing it will simply produce faster, more efficient versions of the same dysfunction.

7. Conclusion

Let us be direct about what this study has and has not accomplished. We have offered a theoretical reading of the normative system construction problem, drawing on Marxist united front theory and systems science. We have traced how the institutional landscape evolved from the early PRC period through reform and opening-up to the present. We have catalogued a set of practical challenges—cognitive gaps, normative fragmentation, coordination failures, homogenized cultivation, weakened platforms, and underdeveloped evaluation—that any serious attempt at reform must confront. And we have proposed a framework: a core norm of unified Party committee leadership surrounded by six sub-norms, with five optimization pathways to guide implementation.

What we have not done—and it is worth being honest about this—is produce a ready-made blueprint that any university can simply adopt. The reason is straightforward: institutions differ. A large research university in eastern China faces different constraints than a smaller teaching-oriented institution in the west. Normative construction that ignores local context in favour of one-size-fits-all templates will fail, no matter how sound the underlying theory.

That said, we do think there are principles that hold across contexts. Party leadership and respect for non-Party members' agency are not contradictory; they need to be held together. Structural coherence and normative innovation are not alternatives; both are needed. Standardization and flexibility coexist in any system that works well in practice. And stability—the kind that comes from embedding norms in durable institutional arrangements—must be balanced against the need for adaptation.

The work ahead is, frankly, substantial. Normative gaps need to be filled; contradictory regulations need to be reconciled. Coordination across sub-systems needs to move from aspiration to practice—which means building real mechanisms, not just issuing exhortations. Evaluation needs to become something other than a box-ticking exercise. And normative innovation—adapting old frameworks to new conditions—needs to be continuous rather than episodic.

We would close with a observation that may seem obvious but is worth stating: united front work in higher education matters not because of any bureaucratic requirement but because universities, as sites of knowledge production and talent formation, shape the kinds of voices that will participate in China's political life for decades to come. Getting the institutional foundations right—building norms that are coherent, implementable, and capable of evolving—is not a task that can be completed once and for all. It is ongoing work. Our hope is that this paper contributes, in however small a way, to that effort.

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