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Governing by recognition: selective universalism and ideological education in Chinese higher education

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Article

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Abstract

Curriculum ideological-political education (CIPE) is officially framed as a universal project: it is meant to reach all universities, disciplines and courses in China. Yet the national machinery through which CIPE is promoted relies heavily on competitive recognition, including demonstration courses, teaching teams and teaching-research centres. This article argues that these designations are best understood as a form of governing by recognition. The state governs universities not only through commands, funding and curricular standards, but also by conferring national recognition, which creates visible exemplars, ranks institutional capacity and organises diffusion. Drawing on official reports and speeches from the 2016 National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Universities, the 2019 symposium for ideological-political theory teachers and the national CIPE guidelines, the article develops the concept of selective universalism: a policy is justified through universal coverage, while its implementation proceeds through selected exemplars. Using public official lists for 1,412 undergraduate institutions, the article compares CIPE demonstration courses with national first-class undergraduate courses. CIPE recognition is highly concentrated: the Gini coefficient is 0.875, the top decile, operationalised as the 142 institutions with the most recognitions, holds 76.0 percent of recognitions, only 214 institutions receive at least one designation, and 84.8 percent receive none. In the preferred robust Poisson count model, which estimates undergraduate major count as a free scale covariate, central-subordinate institutions are much more likely to receive CIPE recognition (IRR = 5.66, $p < 0.001$), while Double First-Class status retains a significant but smaller association (IRR = 3.58, $p < 0.001$). CIPE recognition is therefore not merely a pedagogical quality award or a neutral diffusion device; it is a recognitional instrument of ideological governance, organised most strongly through administrative hierarchy. The analysis measures the allocation of national recognition rather than classroom quality, and identifies associations rather than causal effects.

1. Introduction

Curriculum ideological-political education occupies a revealing place in contemporary Chinese higher education governance (MOE 2016). It is officially framed as a universal project for all universities, all disciplines and all courses (MOE 2020). At the same time, its national implementation depends on a much narrower set of demonstration courses, teaching teams and teaching-research centres. This tension points to what this article calls governing by recognition. National designation is not a decorative honour added after implementation; it is itself a governing technique. By deciding which courses and institutions count as exemplary, the state turns an abstract political-educational objective into visible organisational models, objects of comparison and targets for emulation. The tension is also embedded in a wider political-educational discourse. The 2016 National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Universities placed university ideological work under the fundamental question of whom to educate, how to educate them and for whom they are educated. The 2019 symposium for ideological-political theory teachers linked ideological teaching to soul-cultivation, socialist educational orientation and Party leadership (MOE 2019). CIPE emerges from this context: the stated goal is universal coverage, while the operating instrument is selective recognition.

The puzzle is not that ideological education has become important in Chinese universities (Vickers 2022). That point is already well established in both policy discourse (Liu et al. 2023) and academic research (Lin and Jackson 2023). The more interesting question is how an officially universal ideological mandate is made governable inside a large, differentiated (Zhao et al. 2024) and administratively layered higher education system (Yan and Alsudairi 2021). A policy that asks every university and every course to participate cannot be implemented simply by declaring universal coverage. It has to be translated into routines of responsibility, evaluation and comparison. National demonstration recognition performs precisely this work. It turns a broad political requirement into a selective institutional form through which exemplary courses can be named, circulated and used as evidence of implementation.

This article therefore treats CIPE recognition as a window onto the organisational form of ideological governance (Meyer and Rowan 1977). The issue is not whether universities are expected to teach political values (DiMaggio and Powell 1983); rather, it is how the party-state makes that expectation visible and administratively manageable. In this sense, CIPE belongs to a broader repertoire of Chinese policy instruments that rely on models (Bromley and Powell 2012), lists, pilot sites (Heilmann 2008) and recognised exemplars. Such instruments do not cover the whole field evenly. Their purpose is to produce authorised examples that can stand in for a larger policy field, give local actors a template to follow and provide higher-level authorities with a visible marker of compliance (Han 2020).

The same tension is visible in official reports, speeches and policy documents. The 2016 conference report stressed that university ideological work should attend to students, serve students and maintain Party leadership over ideological work in higher education. It also called for classroom teaching to serve as the main channel, so that specialised ideological-political courses and other courses would move in the same direction. The 2019 symposium report defined ideological-political theory courses as key courses for fulfilling the task of moral cultivation, and it emphasised the unity of political and scholarly content, value guidance and knowledge transmission, and explicit and implicit education. The national CIPE guidelines then translated these principles into an operational agenda: CIPE was to be advanced across all universities and all disciplines, while typical cases, benchmarks and experiences were to be selected and promoted through a multi-level demonstration system. Universalism and selection therefore appear together. The question is not simply whether CIPE is universal or selective, but which institutions become the exemplary nodes through which universalisation is supposed to proceed.

For this reason, CIPE designations should not be treated as a list to be counted and left at that. They are an observable form of state recognition within the higher education system (Allen 2021). Institutions selected as exemplary are placed near the top of a policy-diffusion chain (Ahlers and Christmann-Budian 2023); those outside the recognition list remain on the outer edge of a universalist project (Hicks et al. 2015). CIPE recognition therefore offers a useful entry point into contemporary Chinese governance because it links political education, organisational stratification and state recognition in a single distributional structure (Stack 2020).

The data serve a broader argument. CIPE demonstration recognition reveals a logic of selective universalism carried through state recognition. The discourse of full coverage has not produced an even distribution of recognition. On the contrary, recognition is concentrated among a small minority of institutions, and the concentration is sharper than that found in national first-class undergraduate courses: the Gini coefficient is 0.875 versus 0.748; the top-10-percent share is 76.0 percent versus 55.5 percent; institutional coverage is 214 versus 767; and the zero-recognition share is 84.8 percent versus 45.7 percent.

The article's contribution, then, is not simply a new set of descriptive figures. It offers a more portable explanation: in a multi-level bureaucratic system, the state can govern through recognition (Zheng and Li 2025). Universalist objectives are converted into national qualifications held by a small number of exemplary units, and those qualifications are then diffused as organisational pressure through administrative hierarchy (Zhang and Wang 2025), fiscal support and evaluation systems. The article first locates the argument in the literature, then sets out the institutional background, data, empirical findings and theoretical implications.

The empirical strategy is designed around this theoretical claim. If CIPE recognition were mainly a by-product of general academic hierarchy, then institutions already marked as academically elite (Dong et al. 2020) should dominate once ordinary size differences are taken into account. If, however, CIPE recognition is better understood as a political-administrative instrument, then proximity to central administrative channels (Yang and Wang 2020) should matter in its own right. The distinction is important because Double First-Class status and central subordination are often correlated but not identical. Treating them separately allows the analysis to ask whether ideological recognition follows academic prestige, administrative hierarchy or some combination of the two (Bulman and Jaros 2021).

Table 1 summarises the CIPE recognition types examined in this article and the academic comparison group against which they are assessed.

Table 1
National CIPE recognitions and the academic comparison group

Recognition type	Policy field	Level / batch	Selection form	Use in this article
CIPE demonstration courses	Ideological education	National; ordinary undergraduate section, 300 items	Competitive demonstration designation	Main dependent variable
CIPE teaching teams	Ideological education	National; paired with demonstration courses	Teacher/team recognition	Descriptive context; not pooled into main count
CIPE teaching-research centres	Ideological education	National; small-number centre designation	Institutional centre recognition	Descriptive / robustness context
First-class undergraduate courses	Academic / teaching excellence	Second batch; 5,750 listed items	National course recognition	Comparative academic-recognition benchmark

Note: CIPE = curriculum ideological-political education. Sources: national CIPE demonstration project list (MOE 2021b) and second-batch national first-class undergraduate course list (MOE 2023).

2. Ideological Education, Hierarchy and Recognition

2.1 Academic Policy, Stratification and Recognition

Research on China's academic policy has shown how initiatives from Project 211 (Liu 2018) and Project 985 (Liu et al. 2019) to Double First-Class (Han et al. 2023) have reshaped resource allocation across the higher education system (Wang et al. 2026). One line of work argues that Double First-Class operates through selective upgrading (Gao and Zheng 2020) and tends to concentrate funding, status and policy resources (Piracha et al. 2022) in a small set of institutions, producing inequality between centrally supported universities and the broader institutional field (Lu and Wen 2024). A related line of work highlights the role of ranking (Tang 2022), evaluation and commensuration (Zhang and Wang 2021) in making universities legible to the state and to one another (Hicks et al. 2015; Stack 2020; Allen 2021; Ahlers and Christmann-Budian 2023). Recent studies of university strategy and leadership add that national projects are interpreted through institutional positioning, administrative rank and managerial response (Dong et al. 2020; Ruan et al. 2024; Huang 2026). Taken together, these studies show that policy recognition is not only a reward for prior performance; it also helps structure future competition.

This literature is useful for the present article because it shows that Chinese higher education is not a flat organisational field (Zhao and You 2021). National projects (Jiang et al. 2024) create durable reputational categories (Ruan et al. 2024), and those categories shape how universities understand their own prospects (Huang 2026). Yet the same literature (Zhu and Chu 2026) also raises a question that has not been fully addressed (Jing et al. 2026): whether ideological education policy is distributed through

the same hierarchy as academic excellence (Li and Xue 2021), or whether it follows a more directly administrative logic (Zhang and Wei 2023). CIPE recognition (Wang and Guo 2026) provides an unusually clear case (Meho 2020) for exploring that question, because it is formally a teaching policy but substantively tied to the political mission of higher education (Chen et al. 2021).

Recent work on the Double First-Class initiative further shows that state projects can generate hybrid and sometimes contradictory policy effects. Bian's analysis (2025) of high-level talent discourse, for example, demonstrates how human capital language is recontextualised through the political vocabulary of socialist builders and successors, a point that also complicates narrower human-capital accounts (Marginson 2019) of higher education. Song, Chu and Xu (2021) show from a different angle that elite universities respond strategically to national projects under conditions of resource dependence, policy ambiguity and hierarchical control. Work on institutional complexity in Chinese academia points in the same direction: policy signals, international pressures and domestic political expectations are not separate arenas but overlapping constraints (Shih et al. 2025). These studies are not about CIPE, but they help locate it: CIPE is part of the same Xi-era policy environment in which economic competitiveness, institutional evaluation and political formation are increasingly articulated together.

2.2 Ideological and Value Education

The literature on ideological and value education (Genevaz 2019) has developed along a somewhat different path, remaining closer to institutional description and qualitative mechanism analysis. Existing studies have shown how ideological and political education in universities has developed as a Party-led institutional system operating through courses, counsellors and campus activities (Liu et al. 2023). Recent work on patriotic, moral and citizenship education also makes clear that curriculum is an important site through which the state defines the political meaning of education, especially in the Xi era (Vickers 2022; Lin and Jackson 2023; Zhao et al. 2024). What remains less clear is how such ideological projects are distributed across institutions once they are translated into national demonstration schemes.

Several recent studies are especially close to the present article, though each stops short of its central question. Song, Chu and Xu (2021) examine Double First-Class through interviews at three elite universities, revealing decoupling between policy discourse and practice as well as central-local resource gaps. Their design is a qualitative account of implementation inside elite institutions; this article instead examines ideological education policy and measures its national distribution. Liu, Zhao and Starkey (2023) use twenty-four interviews to describe the institutional structure of ideological and political education; this article supplies a quantitative distributional complement to that institutional argument. Bian (2025) analyses talent discourse and related speeches around Double First-Class through critical discourse analysis; this article borrows the idea that policy texts can be treated as analytical material, while shifting the object from discourse itself to the distribution of state recognition.

2.3 Research Gap and Contributions

The gap, then, is not simply empirical. It is also conceptual. Existing research has shown that Chinese higher education policy is hierarchical, that ideological education is institutionally embedded and that universities respond strategically to state projects. What remains under-theorised is the recognitional mechanism that connects these observations. National recognition is neither a neutral description of good practice nor a purely symbolic honour. It is a policy technology that produces official visibility. By deciding which institutions count as exemplary, the state also defines where a political task is seen to have been successfully translated into organisational practice.

The article builds on these literatures but changes the object of inquiry. Instead of asking how ideological education should be improved, it asks how ideological education becomes administratively recognised. Instead of treating recognition as an after-the-fact award, it treats recognition as part of the policy process itself. This shift matters because the state does not govern universities only through regulation or funding. It also governs by defining the categories through which universities are compared and the achievements through which they can be publicly seen.

In short, existing scholarship has either examined unequal resource allocation in academic policy or described the institutional mechanisms of ideological education. It has not asked how a national ideological-education recognition system is distributed across universities, nor how that pattern compares with a more conventional academic-recognition system. This article addresses that gap through three connected contributions. Conceptually, it develops governing by recognition and selective universalism as a framework for analysing how universal political mandates are administered through selective national designation. Empirically, it maps the national distribution of CIPE demonstration recognition across the full population of 1,412 undergraduate institutions. Comparatively, it places this ideological-recognition system alongside a conventional academic-recognition system and shows that the two follow systematically different distributional profiles.

3. Governing Ideological Education Through Recognition

3.1 Recognition as a Governing Instrument

National CIPE designations are treated here as a recognitional instrument of governance. Recognition in this sense does not mean general moral approval; it refers to administrative certification by the state, through which some institutions, courses and teachers are publicly identified as exemplary. The designation does not allocate large direct subsidies on its own, but it attaches political authority, reputational value and evaluative visibility to selected institutions. It therefore matters as a governing instrument even when its material value is modest.

Recognition matters because it creates a public relation between the state and the recognised institution. The recognised university is not simply said to have performed well; it is authorised to represent a model of implementation. In policy fields where goals are broad, normative and difficult to measure directly, such certification helps convert ambiguity into a visible organisational form. This

argument draws on institutional theory's insight that formal recognition, evaluation and model-building can structure fields even when practice varies behind the formal display (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Bromley and Powell 2012). In the Chinese policy context, it also resonates with work on experimentation, pilots and model diffusion, where selective exemplars are used to organise wider policy movement (Heilmann 2008; Han 2020).

This logic also helps explain why recognition can be both selective and universalising. A universal mandate asks all institutions to act, but a recognitional scheme identifies only some institutions as models. The recognised few become the means through which the broader mandate is made legible. Other universities are not necessarily excluded from the policy task; rather, they are positioned as learners, followers or future applicants within a hierarchy of demonstration. Selectivity is therefore not a failure of universalism. It is one of the ways universalism is operationalised in a large bureaucratic system.

The key mechanism is that recognition turns a political objective into organisational competition. A national designation gives recognised universities symbolic capital and an evaluation advantage. At the same time, institutions without recognition are put in a position of catching up, learning from, or benchmarking against recognised exemplars. The recognition list is therefore not a secondary output of implementation. It is part of policy diffusion itself, embedding ideological-education goals into everyday organisational incentives through public visibility, exemplary status and evaluative coupling.

3.2 Two Allocation Expectations: Cumulative Advantage and Administrative Hierarchy

If recognition is understood as a state-recognition mechanism rather than a simple award, two allocation dimensions deserve attention. The first, Expectation 1, is cumulative advantage, or the Matthew effect (Merton 1968). Existing prestige (Bol et al. 2018) and resources tend to attract new recognition (Liao 2021), allowing advantage to reproduce itself over time (Farys and Wolbring 2021). In the university field, Double First-Class status signals academic prestige and policy priority. A strong Double First-Class effect would suggest that CIPE recognition follows the familiar hierarchy of academic excellence.

The second dimension, Expectation 2, is administrative hierarchy (Mok 2002). Chinese higher education governance is not ordered only by academic prestige (Li and Zhou 2005); it is also embedded in central-local management structures, fiscal channels and accountability chains (Xu 2011). Central-subordinate (Bulman and Jaros 2020) and local universities (Zhuang and Liu 2020) occupy different positions in these channels. If CIPE recognition mainly reflects cumulative advantage, Double First-Class status should do most of the explanatory work. If it reflects administrative governance (Liu et al. 2024), central-subordinate status should remain strongly associated with recognition even after scale and prestige are taken into account. These dimensions need not be mutually exclusive; the question is which of them organises selective universalism more strongly.

The two expectations imply different readings of the same policy field. A prestige-centred reading would interpret CIPE recognition as another layer added to the existing academic hierarchy: strong universities receive more recognitions because they have more capable teachers, more courses and stronger organisational capacity. An administrative-hierarchy reading does not deny these advantages, but it gives greater weight to the channels through which national political tasks are assigned, monitored and displayed. Central-subordinate institutions are more directly connected to these channels. They are also more visible as sites where central policy can be modelled for the rest of the system.

This distinction is not merely technical. It goes to the political meaning of CIPE recognition. If recognition were driven mainly by academic prestige, CIPE would look like an ideological extension of the familiar competition for excellence. If recognition is more strongly associated with central subordination, it suggests that ideological education is organised through the party-state's administrative hierarchy and not simply through the academic ranking order. The empirical analysis below tests these competing expectations rather than assuming in advance that they point in the same direction.

3.3 From Political Task to Administrative Object

The framework (Fig. 1) can be reconstructed from official texts rather than imposed from outside the policy field. Political-task mechanisms appear in the 2016 and 2019 official reports, where university ideological work is repeatedly tied to the questions of whom to educate, how to educate them and for whom they are educated, as well as to Party leadership, socialist educational orientation, soul-cultivation and classroom teaching as the main channel. The 2020 guidelines then translate this political task into an administrative system: institutional responsibility, teacher training, course construction, assessment, model selection and demonstration.

These official texts form a continuous policy chain. The 2016 conference report supplies the political positioning; the 2019 symposium report provides the normative basis for ideological-political courses and the wider curriculum; and the 2020 guidelines translate these principles into arrangements for courses, teachers, evaluation, funding and demonstration. On this basis, CIPE recognition is understood here as an institutionalised recognitional mechanism of ideological governance, rather than a conventional teaching-quality prize.

The policy chain is important because it shows how a political slogan becomes an administrative object. The 2016 and 2019 reports define the problem at a high level: universities must cultivate politically reliable socialist builders and successors, and classroom teaching must be made to serve this task. The 2020 guidelines then specify institutional means. They call for course construction, teacher training, assessment arrangements and demonstration work. In doing so, they move CIPE from the level of political exhortation to the level of organisational routine. Recognition sits at the end of this chain as the visible sign that a university has translated the mandate into a form that can be publicly named.

In bureaucratic terms, this movement from slogan to object is crucial. A broad ideological demand cannot be evaluated until it is attached to units, procedures and recognisable outputs. CIPE recognition provides those units and outputs: courses, teams, centres and named universities. Once the political task is attached to these units, it can be reported, compared and circulated. The recognition system therefore does not merely reflect implementation after it happens; it helps define what implementation is allowed to look like at the national level.

4. Data and Measurement

4.1 Data Sources and Sample

The empirical analysis relies entirely on publicly released official lists; no non-public information is used. The institutional population is taken from the Ministry of Education's 2026 national list (MOE 2026) of ordinary higher education institutions, which reports each institution's supervising authority, location and level. After filtering for undergraduate institutions, the analytical sample contains 1,412 institutions. The CIPE recognition data are taken from the Ministry of Education's 2021 national list (MOE 2021b) of first-batch curriculum ideological-political demonstration projects. That official list contains 699 demonstration courses, 699 teaching teams and 30 teaching-research demonstration centres; this article uses the 300 ordinary-undergraduate demonstration courses as the main outcome, or 42.9 percent of all demonstration courses. Academic recognition is measured with the 2023 second-batch national first-class undergraduate course list (MOE 2023). The original list contains 5,750 course items and, after parsing institution names, contains 5,644 items matched to 767 ordinary-undergraduate institutions after the denominator is applied, with 106 items outside that denominator. Double First-Class status is taken from the 2022 second-round official list (MOE 2022), and undergraduate major counts are collected from the Sunshine Gaokao institution database (CHESICC n.d.). Because the institutional denominator is based on the 2026 MOE list while recognition data come from 2021 and 2023, name changes, mergers and institutions outside the undergraduate denominator were checked during matching; the resulting exclusions are reported in Supplementary Table S2. These sources are cited in the footnotes.

The reliance on public lists is not only a practical choice. It is consistent with the article's object of analysis. National recognition is meant to be public; its value depends on visibility. Publicly released lists are therefore not a weak proxy for a hidden process but part of the process itself. They show which institutions the state chooses to display as exemplary, and they allow the distribution of this display to be examined across the whole undergraduate sector.

4.2 Variables and Measures

The principal outcome variable is the number of CIPE demonstration courses received by each institution. Teaching teams are paired with demonstration courses in the same policy cycle, and only 15 teaching-research centres are matched within the undergraduate denominator used here; these two categories are therefore reported descriptively and not pooled into the main count. The main explanatory

variables are central subordination, Double First-Class status and, in robustness checks, ministry-province (MOE 2018a) co-sponsored status (MOE 2018b). Region is treated as contextual information rather than an independent mechanism in the core regression. Institutional scale is handled through the log of undergraduate major count collected from Sunshine Gaokao. The preferred model estimates this term as a free covariate; a stricter offset model is retained only as a robustness check because it imposes a proportionality assumption that is not supported by the data. As a further robustness check, Supplementary Table S3 reports a binary-response model for whether an institution receives any CIPE demonstration-course recognition. Full-time teacher counts and undergraduate enrolment would be useful alternative scale measures, but they are not yet uniformly machine-readable across all institutions and years; they are therefore identified as a future robustness extension rather than claimed as implemented controls.

Table 2 defines the variables used in the analysis together with their operational definitions and data sources.

Table 2
Variable definitions and data sources

Variable	Operational definition	Source	Analytic role
CIPE demonstration course count	Number of national CIPE demonstration courses matched to each undergraduate institution	National CIPE recognition list; ordinary undergraduate section	Main dependent variable
Central-subordinate institution	1 if the institution is supervised by a central ministry/commission; 0 otherwise	MOE national list of ordinary higher education institutions	Core explanatory variable
Double First-Class status	1 if the institution appears in the second-round Double First-Class list; 0 otherwise	Second-round Double First-Class official list	Prestige / cumulative-advantage variable
Undergraduate major count	Number of undergraduate majors listed for each institution	Sunshine Gaokao institution database	Scale covariate in the preferred count model
First-class undergraduate course count	Number of second-batch national first-class undergraduate courses matched to each institution	Second-batch first-class undergraduate course list	Comparative recognition outcome

Note: CIPE = curriculum ideological-political education; MOE = Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. All variables are measured at the institution level for the 1,412 undergraduate institutions in the analytical sample.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
CIPE demonstration course count	1,412	0.212	0.539	0	3
First-class undergraduate course count	1,412	3.997	7.561	0	64
Central-subordinate institution	1,412	0.081	0.273	0	1
Double First-Class status	1,412	0.101	0.302	0	1
Undergraduate major count (cleaned)	1,309	39.351	18.805	2	121

Note: Standard deviations are sample standard deviations. The cleaned major-count variable treats implausible values of one as missing. Sources: MOE official lists and the Sunshine Gaokao institution database (CHESICC n.d.).

4.3 Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in two stages. Descriptively, it uses Gini coefficients and Lorenz curves (Gastwirth 1972) to measure the concentration of recognition across institutions, supplemented by the share held by the top decile and the proportion of institutions with zero recognition. The Lorenz curves for ideological and academic recognition are placed side by side to show how their distributional structures differ (Fig. 2). The second stage estimates log-link count models (Cameron and Trivedi 1986) because the dependent variable is a sparse non-negative count (Zeileis et al. 2008) with many zeros. The preferred specification is a Poisson log-link model with HC1 robust standard errors (Cameron and Trivedi 2013) and the log of undergraduate major count entered as a free scale covariate. An offset version is also reported as a strict exposure check, but the estimated major-count elasticity in the free model is far below the offset-implied value of one. Negative binomial models (Hilbe 2011) were also estimated, but the dispersion parameter is close to zero and likelihood-ratio tests do not reject the Poisson restriction. The models examine whether central affiliation and Double First-Class status predict CIPE recognition after scale is introduced. Full model results are reported in Supplementary Table S1.

Two measurement boundaries should be kept in view. First, the dependent variable measures the allocation of recognition, an institutionalised output. It does not measure classroom quality or educational effectiveness, which cannot be observed from designation lists alone. Second, the analysis concerns national-level recognition. It therefore captures how the centre identifies and displays exemplary practice, not the full range of local, provincial or internal university work on CIPE.

These boundaries also shape how the findings should be interpreted. A university with no national recognition may still have substantial CIPE activity, and a recognised course may vary in classroom quality. The analysis is not designed to evaluate those pedagogical differences. Its purpose is more specific: to explain the structure of national recognition as an official output. This is why the article focuses on distribution, hierarchy and institutional affiliation rather than on student learning outcomes.

5. Selective Concentration Under a Universalist Target

National CIPE recognition is sharply concentrated despite the language of full coverage. For demonstration courses, the Gini coefficient is 0.875, close to the upper bound of complete inequality. By way of comparison, this exceeds the Gini coefficient of 0.78 reported for faculty production across Chinese universities (Tian et al. 2026) and the range of 0.62–0.76 documented for North American faculty hiring networks (Clauset et al. 2015); these benchmarks measure different objects and are cited only as an order-of-magnitude reference. The top decile, operationalised as the 142 institutions with the most recognitions in the 1,412-institution denominator, holds 76.0 percent of recognitions, and only 214 undergraduate institutions receive at least one demonstration course. Put differently, 84.8 percent receive none. This is not a marginal skew. It is a distribution in which a universalist policy field is made visible through a narrow set of recognised institutions.

The concentration is substantively striking because CIPE is not an elite-university policy in its official formulation. Unlike Double First-Class, it is not explicitly designed to build a small number of globally competitive institutions. Its language is inclusive and system-wide. The distribution therefore reveals a gap between the scope of the political mandate and the selectivity of the national recognition mechanism. The point is not that most universities are outside CIPE work. It is that most universities are outside the nationally visible layer through which CIPE is displayed as exemplary practice.

The comparison with academic teaching recognition shows that this degree of selectivity is not shared by all national teaching schemes. When CIPE demonstration courses are compared with national first-class undergraduate courses, the difference is systematic (Table 4). The academic recognition system is also unequal, but it covers a much larger set of institutions and has a lower Gini coefficient. CIPE recognition is therefore not merely another instance of general university stratification. It is a more concentrated form of recognition attached to a political and ideological task.

This comparison is important because it prevents an overly simple explanation based on size or capacity alone. Large and prestigious universities tend to do well in many national competitions. Yet the much sharper concentration of CIPE recognition indicates that ideological recognition has a distinctive distributional profile. It is not merely that better-resourced universities receive more awards. Rather, the national recognition of ideological education is organised in a way that produces fewer recognised institutions and a steeper hierarchy of visibility.

Table 4
Concentration indicators for the two recognition systems

Indicator	CIPE demonstration courses	First-class undergraduate courses
Matched recognitions	300	5,644
Covered institutions	214	767
Institutions with zero recognition	1,198	645
Zero-recognition share	84.8%	45.7%
Gini coefficient	0.875	0.748
Top 142 by recognition count	76.0%	55.5%

Note: The top decile is operationalised as the 142 institutions with the most recognitions within the 1,412-institution denominator. Gini coefficients are computed across all 1,412 institutions, including those receiving zero recognitions.

6. Administrative Hierarchy and the Politics of Recognition

The regression analysis clarifies the hierarchy through which this concentration is organised. If CIPE recognition were mainly a competition over general university strength, Double First-Class status should be the strongest predictor (Expectation 1). If it is part of governing by recognition, administrative affiliation should be at least as important (Expectation 2), because central-subordinate institutions are closer to national policy channels and more visible in central demonstration work. The results support the second interpretation, Expectation 2. In the preferred Poisson model with major count estimated as a free covariate, central subordination remains positively associated with CIPE recognition, while the Double First-Class coefficient is weaker but still significant. Central-subordinate institutions have an incidence rate ratio of 5.66, while Double First-Class institutions have an incidence rate ratio of 3.58 (Table 5); the full set of nested and robustness models is reported in Supplementary Table S1.

Table 5
Preferred Poisson count model of national CIPE demonstration-course recognition

Term	Coef.	IRR	95% CI	Robust SE	p-value
Intercept	-3.442	0.03	0.02–0.06	0.292	< 0.001
Central-subordinate institution	1.733	5.66	3.49–9.15	0.246	< 0.001
Double First-Class status	1.276	3.58	2.18–5.88	0.253	< 0.001
ln(undergraduate major count)	0.284	1.33	1.14–1.55	0.080	< 0.001

Note: Poisson log-link model with HC1 robust standard errors; the log of undergraduate major count enters as a free covariate. N = 1,309; AIC = 1016.6; pseudo-R^2 = 0.321; Pearson dispersion = 0.899. IRR = incidence rate ratio; the 95% CIs refer to the IRRs. All p-values < 0.001. Full nested models, the ministry-province joint specification, the offset check and binary-response robustness results are reported in Supplementary Table S1.

The result should be read against the two expectations developed above. Double First-Class status captures an academic prestige hierarchy that is highly consequential in Chinese higher education. Central subordination captures a different kind of hierarchy: a university's administrative location in relation to the central state. The fact that central subordination remains more robust after scale is controlled suggests that CIPE recognition is not simply following the strongest academic brands. It is following a hierarchy that is closer to state administrative control and political visibility.

This does not mean academic capacity is irrelevant. Central-subordinate institutions often have more experienced staff, stronger administrative offices and greater familiarity with national application processes. These advantages may help them compete for recognition. But those capacities are themselves embedded in the administrative order. The empirical finding is therefore best understood as evidence of layered hierarchy: academic prestige matters, but it is filtered through a structure in which administrative affiliation remains politically meaningful.

A further implication is that central affiliation should not be treated as a residual administrative detail. In many studies of higher education inequality, administrative affiliation is used mainly as a control variable. Here it is part of the substantive explanation. It captures a university's position within the party-state's policy transmission structure. Central-subordinate universities are not simply better-resourced universities that happen to be managed by central ministries. They are also institutions through which national priorities can be more directly staged, monitored and generalised.

Two qualifications are needed. First, region is closely intertwined with administrative affiliation, as many central-subordinate institutions are concentrated in eastern China; for that reason, region is not interpreted as an independent mechanism in the core regression. Second, the scale term is included in the preferred Poisson model as a free covariate rather than an offset. This is not just a technical preference: the estimated elasticity of recognition with respect to undergraduate major count is 0.284, far below the offset-implied value of one. A Wald test rejects the unit-elasticity restriction, and among the 1,309 institutions with valid cleaned major-count data the free-covariate model fits far better than the

offset model. The core claim is therefore stated using the better-fitting specification: CIPE recognition absorbs both academic prestige and administrative hierarchy, but as a mechanism of state recognition it is more strongly organised by administrative hierarchy.

The close association between CIPE recognition and administrative structure can be understood by reading official institutional arrangements alongside the regression results. Four links stand out. First, the political-task link: the 2016 and 2019 official reports place university ideological work within the cultivation of socialist builders and successors, which makes CIPE a political responsibility rather than a conventional teaching reform. Second, the organisational link: the 2020 guidelines require universities to build institutional responsibility systems, coordinate teaching affairs and Party work, and connect course construction with assessment and evaluation. Third, the demonstration link: national recognition identifies model courses and institutions, turning exemplary cases into standards for wider emulation. Fourth, the accountability link: the same recognition can be reported upward as evidence that a university has implemented the political task. These links make central-subordinate institutions especially well placed to accumulate recognition, not simply because they are academically stronger, but because they are more tightly connected to the channels through which national political tasks are organised and displayed.

This reading also helps explain why the distribution of recognition is not reducible to implementation enthusiasm. Universities may all face pressure to respond to CIPE, but they do not occupy the same position in the national policy field. Some are more likely to be watched, more likely to be mobilised as models and more likely to possess the organisational resources needed to package local practice for national recognition. In such a setting, recognition becomes a channel through which central policy priorities are both implemented and displayed.

7. Selective Universalism as Ideological Governance

This section places the universalist language of official reports, speeches and policy documents alongside the selective concentration identified above. The 2016 National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Universities emphasised ideological work throughout the educational process; the 2019 symposium for ideological-political theory teachers stressed soul-cultivation through Xi Jinping Thought; and the CIPE guidelines extended these principles to all universities, disciplines and courses. These elements are not simply contradictory. Together they form selective universalism: the policy addresses the whole higher education system, but uses a small set of exemplary units to produce models, organise resources and establish benchmarks.

At the discursive level, CIPE is universal, but this universality carries a clear political content. Official reports link university ideological work to the cultivation of socialist builders and successors, Party leadership, socialist educational orientation and classroom teaching as the main channel. The guidelines then require CIPE to be advanced across all universities and disciplines, so that all courses assume an

educational function. This is a form of universalising the particular: a specific political-educational objective is organised as a system-wide requirement for all institutions, teachers and courses.

At the distributional level, however, national demonstration-course recognition remains highly concentrated, as the figures reported above make clear: a Gini coefficient of 0.875, only 214 institutions covered, and 84.8 percent of the sector receiving no recognition at all. Recognition is therefore universal in official scope but selective in administrative display. The point is not simply that some universities do better than others. It is that the state-authorised image of successful CIPE implementation is produced through a limited recognitional field.

CIPE recognition is therefore not the opposite of a universal target; it is one way that the universal target is governed. Official reports supply the political objective, while the guidelines provide organisational means: Party leadership, teaching-affairs coordination, department-level implementation, teacher training, evaluation, funding and demonstration are connected into an implementation chain. National recognition makes that chain visible. The universal target is broken into a sequence: first, visible exemplars are created in selected institutions; then those exemplars guide action elsewhere. The central question is thus not whether recognition is evenly distributed, but which institutions are granted exemplary status.

Selective universalism should therefore be understood as a mode of governing rather than a statistical contradiction. Universalism describes the scope of the political claim: all courses and all institutions should participate in cultivating socialist builders and successors. Selectivity describes the administrative form through which that claim is made actionable: a limited set of courses and institutions are certified as models. The two are mutually reinforcing. The universal claim gives political importance to the recognition scheme, while the selective scheme gives organisational shape to the universal claim.

This interpretation also clarifies why CIPE differs from conventional teaching reform. A normal teaching-improvement programme might use recognition to identify pedagogical innovation. CIPE recognition does that, but it also performs a political function. It marks certain institutions as having successfully integrated ideological goals into professional and disciplinary teaching. The recognition is therefore not only about teaching quality; it is about the state's capacity to render ideological work visible within the ordinary routines of higher education.

This also helps avoid a misleading opposition between symbolic politics and material governance. CIPE recognition is symbolic because it confers status and names exemplary practice. But symbolic status has organisational consequences. It directs attention, shapes internal priorities, encourages universities to invest in application work and gives recognised institutions a stronger position in subsequent evaluation and policy communication. In a system where reputation, administrative visibility and policy compliance are closely connected, symbolic recognition is one of the ways governance becomes effective.

8. Selective Universalism and Chinese Higher Education Governance

These findings speak to two bodies of literature. For research on Chinese higher education stratification, the article is consistent with the established view that policy-driven resources and recognition concentrate along hierarchical lines (Han and Xu 2019). It adds that ideological education does not sit outside academic evaluation (Ding et al. 2021). Through demonstration courses, centres and teams, ideological education is also made commensurable, comparable and selectively recognisable.

For research on ideological education, the article offers a quantitative complement to a largely qualitative tradition. Existing work has described the institutional structure and practice of ideological and political education. This article shows what such institutionalisation looks like at the national distributional level, and it compares ideological recognition with academic recognition. In relation to Song, Chu and Xu (2021), who identify central-local resource gaps through interviews at three elite universities, the present analysis shows that the central-subordinate dimension is visible nationally in the allocation of CIPE recognition.

The article also shifts the scale of analysis. Much research on ideological and political education examines policy language, curriculum design or the institutional work of counsellors and teachers. Those studies are essential for understanding how ideological education is organised internally. Yet national recognition operates at a different scale. It connects individual courses and university-level practices to a central system of visibility. By examining this distributional layer, the article shows how ideological education becomes part of the broader architecture of Chinese higher education governance.

The broader contribution of the article is to link two concepts: governing by recognition and selective universalism. Governing by recognition explains how the state uses national designation to create visible examples, incentives and accountability markers. Selective universalism explains the distributional form of this process: a universal objective is advanced through a narrow and hierarchically organised set of recognised models. The concept helps make sense of why CIPE can be officially universal while nationally recognised CIPE remains concentrated.

Seen this way, governing by recognition differs from both direct command and market competition. It does not require the centre to prescribe every classroom practice, and it does not leave universities to compete only for student demand or research reputation. Instead, it creates a state-authored field of comparison. Universities compete to be recognised as models of a political task, and the resulting list becomes a public map of exemplary compliance. The instrument is soft in the sense that recognition does not operate primarily through punishment, but it is not weak. It shapes incentives, status and organisational attention.

The concept may travel beyond CIPE. Many Chinese policy fields rely on model units (Heffer and Schubert 2023), demonstration zones (Zhu and Wang 2024), pilot projects (He et al. 2024) and ranking-like recognition (Jiang and Li 2025). What CIPE adds is the ideological content of the task and the higher education setting in which it is pursued. The case therefore shows how a recognitional instrument (Chen

and Bian 2025) can be used not only for economic (Zhang and Zhao 2025) or administrative modernisation (Wang 2025), but also for political socialisation (Wang and Yang 2025). In Xi-era higher education, ideological governance is increasingly embedded in the same forms of evaluation and visibility that organise academic competition.

Several limitations remain. The analysis is cross-sectional and identifies associations rather than causal effects. The dependent variable is the allocation of recognition, an institutionalised output, and should not be read as a measure of classroom quality or student learning. Finally, the institutional scale variables are assembled from public sources and should be further improved as more consistent school-level statistics become available. These limitations do not overturn the central finding, but they define its scope: the article explains the national distribution of recognition, not the full pedagogical effects of CIPE.

A further limitation concerns the institutional scale controls. The main analysis uses the log of undergraduate major count because this is the most consistently machine-readable scale measure available across the 1,412-institution denominator. In cleaning this field, 13 records with an implausible count of one were treated as missing after manual inspection showed that they included comprehensive universities whose Sunshine Gaokao pages had clearly not been parsed as complete major lists. The 103 excluded cases consist of these 13 records and 90 institutions without a usable machine-readable major count, reducing the scale-control sample from 1,412 to 1,309 institutions. In the preferred specification, the term enters as a free covariate rather than an offset. This is substantively defensible because national CIPE nominations are not allocated in direct proportion to the number of undergraduate majors; the 2021 project-construction notice (MOE 2021a) set nomination opportunities through administrative channels that do not scale one-for-one with programme breadth. The offset model is therefore reported as a strict exposure check rather than the headline model. Full-time teacher and undergraduate enrolment data remain important future extensions, but they are not claimed here as implemented controls.

Using public data for 1,412 undergraduate institutions, this article has examined how national CIPE recognition is selectively allocated under a discourse of universal coverage. CIPE demonstration courses are highly concentrated, more so than national first-class undergraduate courses. Central subordination remains a positive predictor after institutional scale is controlled through undergraduate major count, while Double First-Class status is weaker but still significant. The preferred free-covariate Poisson model, the stricter offset check, negative-binomial diagnostics and binary-response checks point in the same direction. These results support the article's central argument: CIPE is governed through selective universalism. The state does not need to recognise every institution equally in order to universalise a political task. Instead, it recognises a limited set of institutions as models, uses their recognition to display policy implementation, and turns ideological education into a visible hierarchy of exemplary practice.

The article's findings also speak to a broader feature of contemporary Chinese governance. The party-state often pursues ambitious system-wide objectives through selective, visible and competitive policy instruments. This approach allows political goals to be universal in language while remaining manageable in administration. In the case of CIPE, the universal mandate to integrate ideological education across the curriculum is not contradicted by the concentration of national recognition. Rather, the concentration shows how the mandate is organised: through a hierarchy of recognised models that can be circulated, imitated and reported as evidence of implementation.

The significance of this case lies beyond the education sector alone. CIPE recognition illustrates how ideological governance can be institutionalised without appearing only as propaganda or coercion. It works through course construction, teacher recognition, administrative evaluation and public lists. These are ordinary tools of university governance, but they are mobilised to serve a political project. The result is a recognitional order in which the ideological work of higher education becomes measurable enough to govern, selective enough to display and universal enough to claim system-wide reach.

The argument should therefore be read as an account of a specific policy field and as a contribution to the study of Chinese governance. CIPE is specific to higher education and to the ideological agenda of the Xi era, but the governing form it reveals is more general. The party-state sets a universal objective, transforms it into a recognisable administrative output, concentrates national visibility among selected models and uses those models to organise wider compliance. This is the logic of selective universalism. It is not an incidental unevenness in implementation, but a recurrent way in which universal political claims are made operational in a hierarchical system.

Declarations

Data availability: The analysis uses only publicly released official lists and the Sunshine Gaokao institution database. All source lists are openly accessible from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (https://www.moe.gov.cn) and Sunshine Gaokao (https://gaokao.chsi.com.cn/sch/), as cited in the reference list. The cleaned institution-level dataset assembled for this study is provided as a supplementary file with this submission, and is also available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author contributions: The author was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, the collection and analysis of the data, and the writing of the article.

Competing interests: The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval: This study did not involve human participants, human data or animals; ethical approval was therefore not required.

Informed consent: Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants.

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Figures

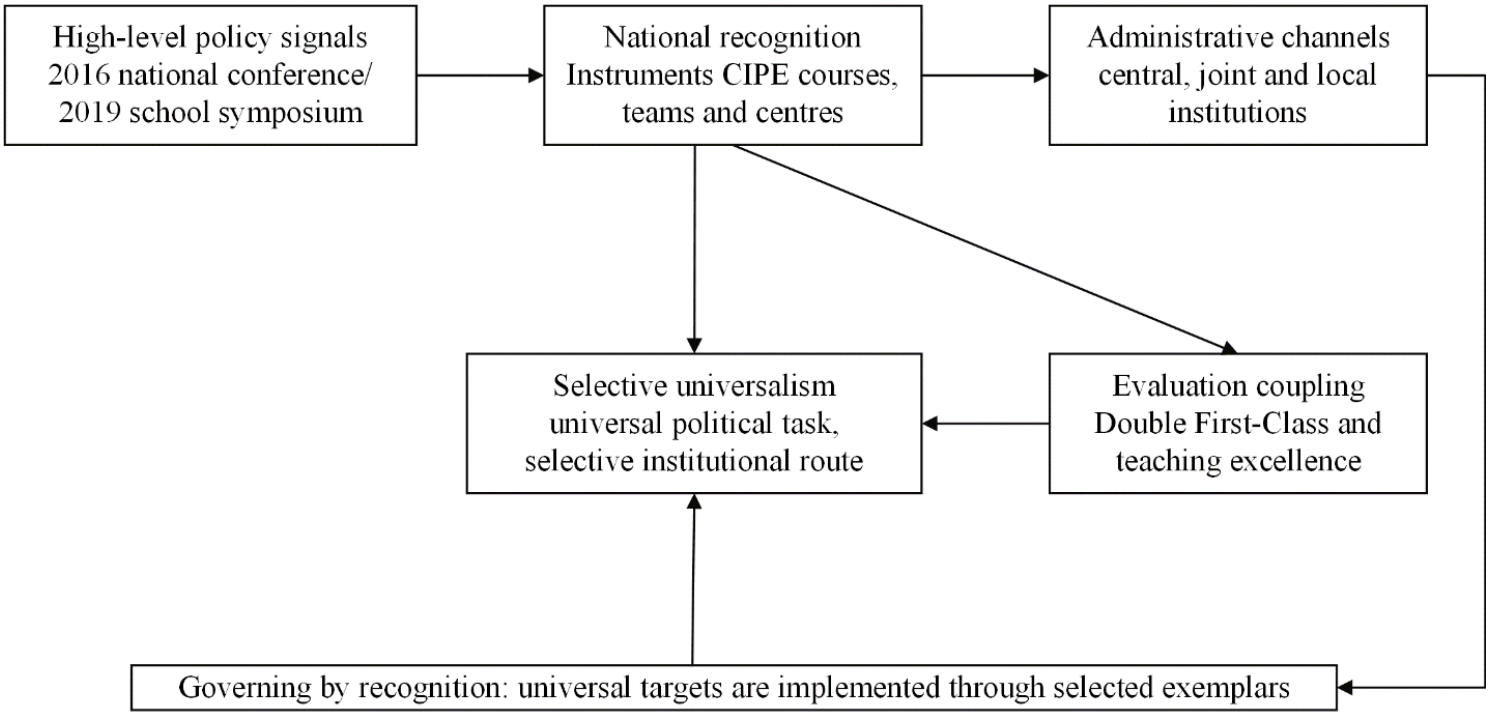


Figure 1

Governing by recognition and selective universalism: universal targets, national designation, administrative hierarchy and evaluative coupling. The figure summarises the article's analytical framework: a universal ideological mandate (CIPE for all universities, disciplines and courses) is converted into competitive national designation; designation is allocated through the party-state's administrative hierarchy and coupled to evaluation systems; and the resulting small set of recognised

exemplars is used to display and diffuse the universal mandate across the higher education system. CIPE = curriculum ideological-political education.

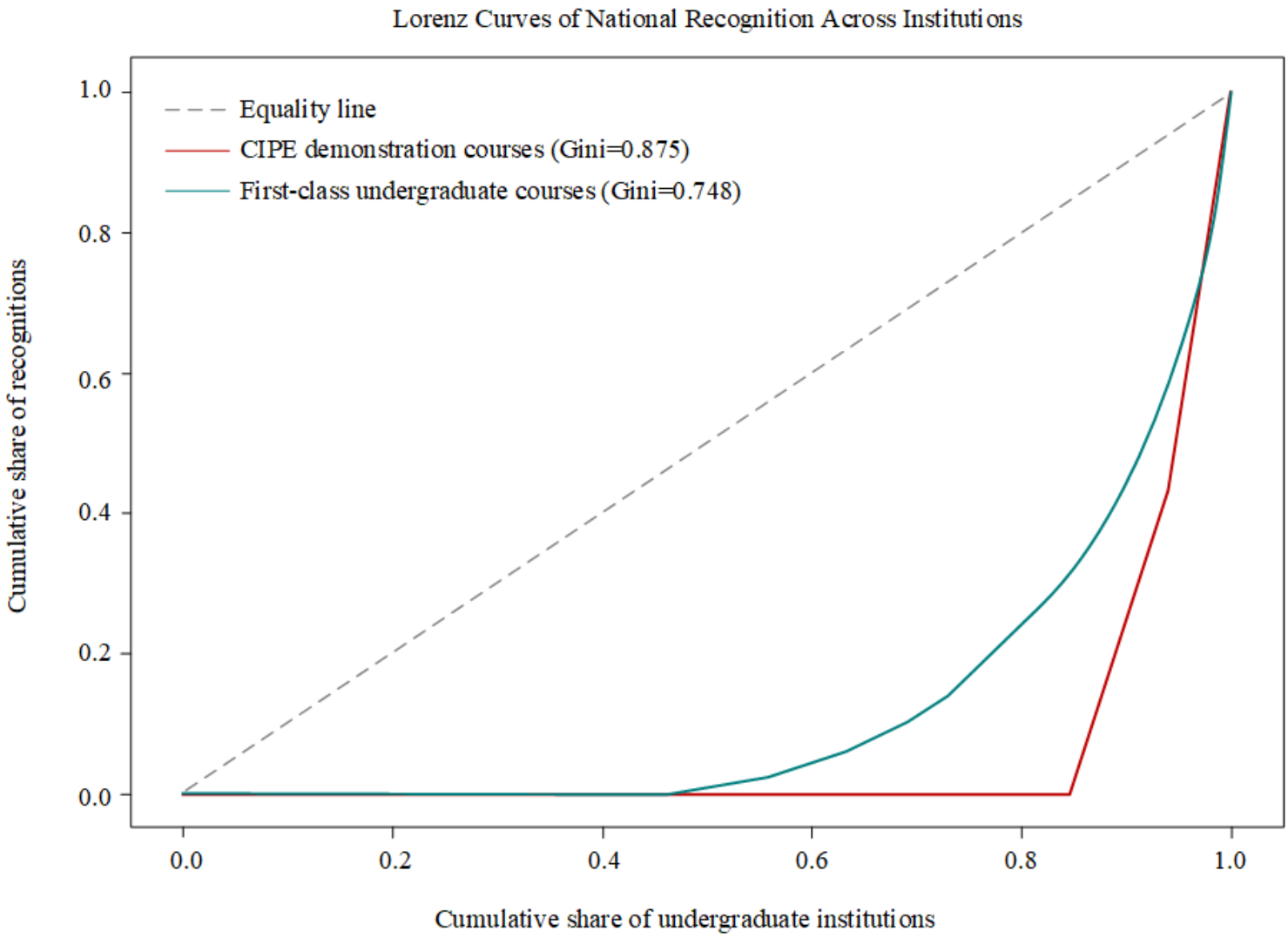


Figure 2

Lorenz curves for CIPE recognition and first-class undergraduate courses. Curves plot the cumulative share of national recognitions against the cumulative share of the 1,412 undergraduate institutions, ordered from least to most recognised; the diagonal indicates perfect equality. The CIPE demonstration-course curve (Gini = 0.875) lies further from the diagonal than the first-class undergraduate course curve (Gini = 0.748), indicating a sharper concentration of ideological recognition. Sources: Ministry of Education official lists (MOE 2021b, 2023). CIPE = curriculum ideological-political education.

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