December 7, 2022 @ 9am – via Zoom
SEMINAR: Economics of Science & Engineering | joint with | China Economy Seminar
Harvard University, Department of Economics
Host: Professor Richard B. Freeman

SPEAKER: David Yang (Harvard University)
TITLE: “Power and the Direction of Research: Evidence from China’s Academia”

ABSTRACT:
Can China stimulate and sustain innovation with its juxtaposition of top-down emphasis on innovation and the presence of powerful leaders within academic institutions? In this paper, we investigate whether powerful actors curtail academic autonomy and freedom, and impact the direction and quality of innovation. We collect comprehensive data on the scientiﬁc publications of researchers in the leading 109 Chinese universities and the leadership changes in these universities. We use NLP methods to measure the similarity between faculty members’ and their leaders’ research portfolios. We ﬁnd that immediately after — and not before — the leaders take ofﬁce, faculty members begin to shift their research direction towards that of their leaders. Such shifts cannot be explained by the signaling of star researchers’ activities, but can be attributed to leaders’ political power over faculty members’ career trajectories. Leaders appointed by the Communist Party exert greater inﬂuence on faculty members’ research directions, and leaders’ inﬂuence is stronger among disciplines and institutions that have historically or recently experienced academic persecution. We also document signiﬁcant costs of leaders’ inﬂuence on research quality. Below-median productivity leaders lead to even greater increases in similarity, and switches from above-median to below-median leaders is associated with sizable declines in citations. Such decline is driven by citations to papers that are most similar to new leaders.

BIO:
[David Yang’s](http://davidyyang.com) research focuses on political economy, behavioral and experimental economics, economic history, and cultural economics. In particular, David studies the forces of stability and forces of changes in authoritarian regimes, drawing lessons from historical and contemporary China. David received a B.A. in Statistics and B.S. in Business Administration from University of California at Berkeley, and PhD in Economics from Stanford. David is currently a Prize Fellow in Economics, History, and Politics at Harvard and a Postdoctoral Fellow at J-PAL at MIT. He will join Harvard Economics Department as an Assistant Professor in 2020.