

# Higher Educational Leadership Reform in China -- from Centralisation to Decentralisation: a Case Study of a Democratic Leader

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**ABSTRACT.** *Since the middle of the twentieth century, the Chinese educational system has been severely affected by the traditional dictatorial culture of the government and the hierarchical education system of the Soviet Union, thus forming a centralised, top-down educational system. Li (2012) explains that whilst school leaders are generally not considered to be autonomous, they are essentially autocratic. Due to this paternalistic leadership system students lose the right and ability to learn independently, instead they are trained to study like machines. In order to inspire both students' initiative to learn and their ability to be academically innovative, the Chinese educational leadership model needs urgent change. Therefore, researching and exploring China's educational leadership reform is not only highly significant now, but can also provide a basis for future reform and development.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Higher leadership reform, Democratic leadership, University management*

## 1. Introduction

Major reform attempts of the Chinese education system have been attempted throughout the 21st century (Gao, 2002; Hannum and Park, 2002; Wu and Pang, 2011). These include the 2001 Basic Education Reform (Ministry of Education, 2001a), the New Curriculum Reform (Ministry of Education, 2001b), and the recent National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Program (Ministry of Education, 2010). A key tenet of these reforms is the focus on students' own initiative; this aims to encourage students to actively participate in teaching activities, so as to improve their learning effectiveness and cultivate individual learning responsibilities.

Along with a change in traditional educational leadership methods, a gradual shift from a centralised to a decentralised leadership style has been noted among Chinese school leaders as they attempt to conform to these concepts and trends.

Tang, Lu and Hallinger (2014) note that these reforms represent major changes taking place within the leadership systems in Chinese schools. Traditional paternalistic leadership is gradually being replaced by democratic leadership. Therefore, this article will perform a case study of a democratic leader of a Chinese university. Using a variety of methods including investigations and interviews, it will recognise different phases in his leadership style, analyse the impact of a democratic leadership for university and college management and explore the positive impact of this on Chinese educational reform.

In this essay an investigation and analysis method will be used to conduct a case study. An interview will be held with a Chinese university leader who is undergoing such a reform. After this, relevant information about important changes in leadership style before and after China's educational reform will be collected. The next section of this essay will focus on analysing relevant perspectives on China's previous centralised patriarchal leadership model and the current decentralised democratic one. It will also aim to explain the application and impact of democratic leadership in the Chinese higher education system. The next part the method used for data analysis will be introduced. Finally, the meaning of the results will be interpreted, and the actual impact analysed.

## **2. Literature Review**

In general, the literature base on educational leadership is very significant. Kenda and Miller (2016) consider that varying styles of leadership can have significantly different impacts on an organisation's work. In fact, many international studies have shown that it is the colleges that are led by proactive principals that demonstrate the greatest improvements. This is because they are able to effectively lead staff in the achievement of new goals in teaching, learning and enhancement of school quality (Hallinger, 2003, 2011; MacBeath, and Cheng, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008). China's experience is in line with global trends. In the past decade, principals have assumed major responsibilities for leading schools (Hallinger, 2011; MacBeath and Cheng, 2008). Reform of leadership style has the potential not only to improve the status and quality of university education, but also to boost overall reform of the Chinese educational system.

However, the Chinese educational system reform is still at the initial stage of development, and progress remains slow. In recent years, Chinese policy makers have become increasingly aware that reforms are not just policies, but that they have the potential to exact real change within universities (Chen, 2004, 2005; Cui, 2006; Dong, 2006). Therefore, this essay mainly discusses the changes in the leadership style of Chinese university leaders, and its impact in the context of reforms. Additionally, it will analyse the advantages of democratic leadership, as well as illustrating its role and performance within China's educational reform.

### ***2.1 Paternalistic Leadership in China***

China is a country with a significant history, and the system of feudal autocratic monarchy has had a profound impact on political, economic and cultural leaders. In the past, a traditional Chinese leader was likely to be a paternalistic leader who has “a style that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence” (Farh and Cheng, 2000: 91). The teacher’s role is to transmit knowledge, and the students are expected to accept this knowledge passively; higher test scores and further study represent the pinnacle of academic success, personal development and innovation are not relevant factors. The goal of Chinese education leaders can be summarised thus: all students are to sit the National College Entrance Examination (Li, 2012).

Drayton and Prins (2011) believe that leadership activities can both support and hinder academic progress. The paternalistic style of leadership described above will only serve to reduce students’ interest in learning and efficiency in doing so, as well as negatively impacting the development and regulation of China’s modern education system (Li, 2012). As Cervero, Wilson and Inglis (1994) explain, the deep-rooted hierarchical structure of education leadership will prevent college leaders from considering students’ actual learning needs and thus creating individualised teaching. The slow development of the education system and a lack of talent have both been identified as obstacles to China’s economic development and transformation (Li, 2012), and thus educational leaders are increasingly aware of the need for educational leadership reform.

### ***2.2 Democratic Leadership***

The concept of democracy itself is very diverse and has many forms (Held 1996). Apple & Beane (2007) define democratic leadership based on the concept of “democracy” that forms the basis of “democratic lifestyle.” They stress that “democracy results from explicit attempts by educators to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life” (Fang and Huang, 2015). In order to implement democracy, therefore, leaders need to create favorable conditions. This could be achieved by delegating some of their rights to other team members, thereby allowing democracy to be implemented. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the notion of informed consent, access to information and the right to disagree, thereby enabling leaders to listen to other’s opinions (Fang and Huang, 2015). Therefore, democracy should reach the college’s students in a decentralised way. In line with this concept, the college leader who is interviewed in this essay suggests that colleges and universities can set up student committees, councils and other decision-making institutions. Students will then have the right to influence many aspects of the decision-making process, including the teaching objectives and methods of college leaders. This will then enable leaders to formulate policies which are a better match with students’ expectations.

Democratic leaders could provide more discourse power to college students. By the time students reach college they tend to have a fully formed value system and

avored learning methods, attempts to interfere with and change these will generally be met by rebellion and resistance. Therefore, a democratic leadership style can provide a more relaxed learning environment, which will allow students to take ownership and control their style of learning (Fingeret and Jurmo 1989, Campbell 2001), as well as encouraging their critical thinking and democratic decision-making (Jurmo, 1987) and improving their ability to achieve change in personal, planning and community affairs (Auerbach, 1992). In addition, it also will promote students' psychosocial welfare, such as by improving self-esteem, confidence, and collective mobility (Suave, 2001).

### **3. Research Design**

#### ***3.1 Background of the Interviewee***

The participant in this study is the dean (referred to as D1) of the School of Education at a prestigious university in eastern China who, as well as presiding over a decade of first-line teaching experience, also has school management and leadership experience. He has been a teaching assistant since 1993 and started as a lecturer in education in 1995. Since 2000, he has been engaged in teaching work while serving as the dean of the School of Education.

Core reasons for choosing D1 are the fact that he experienced college education in China in both the 20th and the 21st century and that he has served as a leader. By exploring his work and leadership experience, it is possible for the author to gain an understanding of the leadership styles he engaged at different times from a microscopic perspective. in order to analyse the changes and the impact of changes in this period.

#### ***3.2 Design and Paradigm***

This study is a qualitative study. The data collected from this study is usually obtained through in-depth interviews, focus groups, direct observations, document reviews, and recording reviews (Tsai, Kohrt, Matthews and et al, 2016). Information and facts are mainly collected through interviews with D1 (Targum, 2011; Weiss, 1994), as well as stories (Birch & Miller, 2000; Romanoff, 2001), thereby enabling the interviewer to learn about experiences and their meanings and emotions (Weiss, 1994). The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and understand the practical application of democratic leadership in Chinese universities from the perspective of D1, in order to analyse the advantages and impact of democratic leadership style in education reform.

#### ***3.3 Methodology***

This is a case study. This method enables researchers to conduct a

comprehensive, vivid and in-depth investigation and to gain an overall understanding of the specificities of a case (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Kumar, 2011; Lambert, 2012; Punch, 2014; Thomas, 2011a). Punch (2014) and Thomas (2011b) believe that a case study may be too subjective, and therefore not able to provide an accurate summary. However, in this case the interviewee experienced both the centralised educational leadership before the educational reform and the democratic leadership thereafter. Therefore, in the discussion of leadership reform and practice in Chinese universities, his leadership and management experience can be considered as very representative.

### **3.4 Method**

A semi-structured interview will be used to collect the data which is needed for this study. The main aim of this method is to collect systematic information on a set of central themes while undertaking further exploration should new problems arise (Wilson, 2013). This demonstrates the flexibility of the semi-structured interview, as interviewers can ask follow-up questions on any issues which might arise during the initial interview process. This interview involves the use of opened and closed questions which can provide qualitative content. Researchers believe that this method of “collecting in-depth information” is consistent with the case study method (Kumar, 2011: p. 150).

The interview will be conducted as a telephone interview. It is primarily a semi-structured or structured interview conducted over the phone or through certain internet audio services, such as Skype or Microsoft Lync which are used as a virtual phone (Wilson, 2013).

### **3.5 Limitations and Ethics**

Prior to commencing the study, the author will act in accordance with ethical guidance and obtain full consent from D1 after explaining the content and purpose of the study to him. The telephone interview will be arranged at a time convenient for D1, and with his permission the conversation will be recorded throughout. The author will indicate that he is free to choose whether to accept the interview and has the right to withdraw from the survey midway. Finally, the name of the real university involved in the survey and the name of the interviewee will all be replaced by a pseudonym or abbreviation. In addition, all the collected data in this study will be handled confidentially, before being discarded following the completion of the study.

## **4. Results and Data Analysis**

The research method and the way in which data is collected will determine the method of data analysis. Qualitative data analysis includes the identification, coding, and classification of content (Byrne, 2001). Sutton and Austin (2015) believe that

qualitative researchers should report “discoveries” rather than presenting these as “conclusions”. Results should never just be directly presented, instead researchers should integrate conclusions within the presented data. Seers (2012) describes the data analysis process as a process of conversion and interpretation. Therefore, the audio material collected in the semi-structured interview, along with the author’s notes, will form the main body of information to be analysed. From this, the author will draw the key conclusions.

Through the process of data analysis, the researcher is able to familiarise herself with the content of the survey, as well as re-reviewing this content. This stage will also allow her to collate and clarify data, thus beginning to draw initial conclusions. This will ensure factual correctness of the results, thereby making the analysis more actual and thus the research more valuable.

Through interviews with D1, the researcher divided D1’s working experience into three distinct phases: the initial observation of national education policy and school leadership; the exploration and practice of democratic leadership as a college leader; the formation and influence of democratic leadership. Within this study a two-pronged approach will be taken: the drawbacks of the traditional paternalistic leadership approach and its negative impact on the development of students and colleges will be examined, and alongside this the advantages of democratic leadership and its role in Chinese educational reform will be discussed. A detailed description of these three stages follows.

#### ***4.1 Early Stage of Observation***

In 1993, D1 was a teaching assistant, who was starting his teaching career. The researcher learned that at this time the main management power of the Chinese educational system was still in the hands of the school’s competent authorities and education leaders. Li (2012) describes how at this time educational leadership was overwhelmed by the prevalent authoritarian culture and the administrative monopoly of the planned economic system. In 1995, D1 became a lecturer in pedagogy principles. In the interview he mentioned that his teaching methods focused on teacher centred education. It becomes clear from the content of the interview that under this “dictatorship” most students did not have many academic innovations, or indeed achievements, instead they learned the course contents mechanically.

Through these parts of the interview, the researcher noticed that the educational leadership model in China was “administrative, monopolised, and formalised” during that period (Xucheng Yuan, 2009). Under this centralised control, students gradually lost their passion for learning. This led to both an under-developed academic level and the slow development of colleges and universities. This shows that paternalistic leadership will hinder academic progress and innovation.

#### ***4.2 Preliminary Exploration and Practice of Democratic Leadership***

The implementation of the macro-management system reform in Chinese

universities in 2000 is widely regarded as the “ice breaking period” within educational leadership reform. Ye (2009) and Zhong (2005) mention that all school changes which have come about since 2000 have been performed within the context of educational reforms. At this stage, all the reform objectives focus on reshaping college management methods to improve students’ learning efficiency (Tang, Lu, and Hallinger, 2014). It can be understood that the concept change which was brought about by educational leadership reform also deeply influenced educational leaders.

D1 mentions which allowed students to use their own “voices”. The relationship between teachers and students, which had previously been a “superior-subordinate” one began to change, and students and teachers worked together in order to develop and improve the teaching and learning process. This greatly improved the students’ learning effectiveness.

Therefore, be seen that these changes were stimulated by policies demanding school leaders delegate their power (Tang, Lu, Hallinger, 2014). For a long time now, students have expected open learning methods and democratic discourse power. The researcher believes that these measures and phenomena have demonstrated D1’s democratic leadership style and embodied its advantages.

#### ***4.3 The Development and Influence of a Democratic Leadership Style***

With 10 years of experience, D1 became the dean of the School of Education in 2010. During this period, China’s educational reform was still undergoing dramatic change. In July 2010, the outline of the first National Long-term Education Plan (2010-2020) was issued by China’s Ministry of Education. According to the then current educational situation, it proposed that national education must abide by the principle of: “[being] people-oriented, [demonstrating] innovation and fairness, [demonstrating] high efficiency and high quality” (Li, 2012). The status of students within the teaching process has gradually improved. D1 mentions which demonstrate that by leading in a democratic fashion, leaders can provide a more relaxed academic environment which allows students to become managers of their own learning processes, and indeed of their lives.

In addition, the researcher found that the democratic leadership method not only led to academic progress in the colleges and universities, but also allowed for the gradual optimisation of the colleges and universities’ leadership structure. Encouraged and authorised by school leaders, students have become motivated to participate in very structure of college and university life. This also has a positive impact on a student’s personal ability. It can be seen that democratic leadership can nurture the intellectual capital which is required for future development of the students and can reserve talents for the country’s economic and cultural development. There is no doubt that these exceptional talents will promote national reform and development once they enter the country’s various industries after graduation. Therefore, the educational reform goal of “prospering the country with science and education and strengthening the country with talents” will be realised.

## 5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that with the development of national culture and economy, the educational system reform is an irreversible historical trend that will not be stopped by anyone or anything (Li, 2012). China's traditional paternalistic leadership is a product of the old era, and it hinders both the development of students' personal qualities and the development of more effective university management systems. In addition, it completely contradicts the concept of and appeal for national educational reform and indeed became a stumbling block in the reform process.

The researcher learned from interviews with D1 that the paternalistic leadership style has hindered the development of college education in two aspects. First of all, from the student's point of view, it reduces the need for independent learning and thus the capacity to do so. Under this centralised leadership, students whose thinking is limited by teachers can only passively accept knowledge. They cannot utilise their personal learning model. Secondly, from the teacher's point of view, it limits teachers' discourse power in their teaching processes. Teachers who have innovative teaching concepts are unable to utilise these and they must conduct uniform teaching under plans put in place by the school leaders. This directly led to the low-quality teaching and the stagnation of the output of talent. Therefore, the importance of China's educational system reform has been widely identified (Li, 2012).

The author gleaned from both the literature and the interview that democratic leadership can maximise students' autonomy of learning and development and encourage them to dare to be creative. It is in line with the core concept of "improving the quality of education and cultivating innovative talents" in educational reform (Li, 2012). At the same time, democratic leaders can create a good academic atmosphere through communication with other teachers, and thus can provide impetus for the further education of teachers.

In addition, it must be noted that democratic leadership and educational reform are intertwined. The reform provides theoretical and policy support for democratic leaders, and the results of democratic leadership will promote the realization of reform goals.

As times continue to change, China's educational reform continues to deepen. New educational goals, policies, plans and practices will bring new challenges to Chinese school leaders in the future (Chen, 2005; Dong and Geng, 2008; Feng, 2006; Ye, 2009; Zhong, 2005). Future research, can, therefore, be set against a background of the current time and the present national policies in order to carry out an in-depth study of the characteristics of China's educational democratic leadership style. Its development, change and subsequent impact can then be assessed.

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