

# A Study on the Basic Characteristics of the Selection of Headmasters of Provincial "Double First-Class" Universities in China

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**Abstract:** From 2012 to 2022, the 122 headmasters of the 54 provincial "double first-class" universities were selected and appointed with the following characteristics: middle-aged males have an absolute advantage, the political status of being a member of the Chinese Communist Party is emphasized, natural science scholars with high academic qualifications and titles are the main targets of selection, and promotion is the main method of appointment. The main method of selection is promotion, and the term of office is generally short.

**Keywords:** headmaster selection; "double first-class"; provincial "double first-class"; higher education

## 1. Introduction

The "Double First-Class" programme was issued by the Central People's Government of the Republic of China on 24 October 2015 to make new arrangements for higher education in the new era, marking the formal entry of Chinese higher education into the "Double First-Class" era. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and other departments jointly announced list of the first and second rounds of "Double First Class" construction in China on 21 September 2017 and 14 February 2022 respectively. The two rounds of "double first-class" construction list involved a total of 147 universities, including 54 provincial "double first-class" universities.

Many scholars have made many useful investigations on the selection of higher education headmasters, mainly focusing on the following aspects: Firstly, in terms of the target population, the study mainly focuses on public undergraduate colleges and universities at various levels in China, and uses statistical and quantitative analysis to summarize the characteristics of the selection of headmasters.<sup>[1]</sup> Secondly, it examines the institutional mechanism for the selection of Chinese presidents, identifying problems and giving insights and suggestions.<sup>[2]</sup> Its third is to examine the roles and functions of university headmasters.<sup>[3]</sup> Fourth, to conduct a comparative study on the of the selection of university presidents in China and abroad.<sup>[4]</sup> This paper selects 122 past presidents of 54 provincial "double first-class" universities from 2012 to 2022, and examines the basic characteristics of the selection of presidents of provincial "double first-class" universities in China in the context of "double first-class". This paper examines the basic characteristics of headmaster selection in the of "double first-class".

As the core manager of a university, the headmaster's "experience" and "ability" are important conditions and criteria for appointment. In concrete practice and implementation, "experience" and "ability" are often quantified in terms of specific rules and regulations, including gender, age, political appearance, educational background, work experience, etc.

## 2. In terms of gender, age and political profile: headmasters are predominantly middle-aged male party scholars

The male headmasters have an overwhelming advantage over the female headmasters, showing a clear tendency to "favour men over women" in their selection. According to the statistics, among the provincial "double first-class" headmasters, 117 are male headmasters, accounting for 96%. There are 5 female headmasters, accounting for only 4%. Of the 75 headmasters appointed before the "double first-class" strategy, 73 were male headmasters, accounting for 97%, while 2 were female headmasters, accounting for only 3%. After the "Double First Class" strategy, there were 47 headmasters, 44 of were male, accounting for 94% of the total; there were 3 female headmasters, accounting for only 6%

the total. (Table 1) Overall, there is no significant change in the "preference for men over women" in the selection of headmasters before and after the "Double First Class" strategy.

The tendency to favour men in the selection of headmasters is not unique to provincial "double first-class" universities, but is a common phenomenon in the entire Chinese higher education system. There are several reasons for the preference for men over women in the selection of headmasters: firstly, women tend to be conservative in their social role and perception of their social value. Influenced by the traditional "men are the mainstay of society, women are the mainstay of society", most women prefer to maintain the happiness and harmony of their families when faced with the dilemma of family and career; secondly, the conflict and contradiction between the age of marriage and career advancement. 25-40 years old is the period of maturity and career advancement. The age of 25-40 is a period of maturity and career advancement, but women in this age group have to bear multiple responsibilities such as marriage, childbirth and work at the same time, which delays the rate of career advancement of women; thirdly, the choice of profession is at odds with social tendencies. At the tertiary education level, women are more inclined to major in humanities and social sciences than men, but humanities and social sciences majors are far less advantageous than natural sciences majors in terms of "high output" and "high application", and the few women scientists and engineers do not meet the requirements of "scientists". The few women scientists and engineers could not meet the needs of the social tendency of "scientists" and "engineers" to rule the university. Fourthly, the legacy of the 1970s and 1980s, when the proportion of women in higher education was lower than that of men, is that for the past 10 years, most of the provincial "double-class" presidents were born in the 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, the total number of university students in China was low, and the proportion of female students was much lower than that of male students, resulting in a shortage of female "high-calibre" talent in society as a whole.

Of the 122 headmasters, 86 (70%) were aged 50-59 when they took up their posts and 32 (26%) were aged 40-49 when they took up their posts. Only four headmasters, or 3%, were aged 60 and over at the time of appointment. (Table 1) Of these, the youngest was the former president of Zhengzhou University, Shen Changyu, who was 40 years old when he took over as president. The oldest are Zhu Qingshi, the founding president of Southern University of Science and Technology, and Jiang Mianheng, the founding and current president of Shanghai University of Science and Technology, both of whom retired at the age of 63 and are at the forefront of Chinese higher education reform. After the introduction of the "double first-class" strategy, 36 of the 47 past presidents were in the age range of 50-59, accounting for 77%, a slight increase from 67% before the "double first-class" policy. This shows that provincial "double first-class" headmasters are mainly "post-50s". This age group is the "right age", which meets the requirements of experience and energy to do the job.

Party membership is also not an absolute condition in the Chinese higher education system. However, in practice, the majority of university presidents have been party members as a regular mechanism. Of the 75 presidents who served before the "Double First Class" strategy, 65 (87%) were members of the CPC and 10 (13%) were members of democratic parties and non-partisan groups. After the "Double First Class" strategy, 39 out of 47 headmasters were CPC members, accounting for 83%. 8 headmasters were members of democratic parties and non-partisan people, accounting for 17%. In general, 104 of the 122 presidents of provincial "double first-class" universities are CPC members, accounting for 85% of the total. There are 18 members of democratic parties and independents, accounting for 15%. (Table 1) Thus, it can be seen that it is a general rule and an important reference criterion to pay attention to the party membership of headmasters in the selection process of provincial "double first-class" universities.

In the management structure of universities, China has a system of presidential responsibility under the leadership of the Party Committee. At the macro level, the university president represents the will of the Party and the government. At the micro level it is vested in the collective will or intention of the university's party committee and administrative team<sup>[5]</sup>. This also means that the president is both the decision-maker and the executor of university affairs. At the same time, if the headmaster is a member of the Communist Party, he or she is also the deputy secretary of the party committee of the school. This institutional arrangement is often more conducive to the headmaster in the process of managing school affairs, coordinating the relationship between party affairs and school affairs, implementing the collective opinion into specific school affairs according to the school's needs, and promoting the overall development and long-term progress of the school.

*Table 1: Statistics on the gender, age and political profile of provincial "double-class" headmasters*

Projects		Before "Double First"		After "Double First Class"		Total	Percentage of
		Number of people	Percentage of	Number of people	Percentage of		
Gender	Male	73	97%	44	94%	117	96%
	Female	2	3%	3	6%	5	4%
Age	40-49 years	22	29%	10	21%	32	26%
	50-59 years	50	67%	36	77%	86	70%
	60+ years	3	4%	1	2%	4	3%
Political affiliation	Communist Party member	65	87%	39	83%	104	85%
	Democratic parties and non-partisans	10	13%	8	17%	18	15%

### 3. In terms of educational and academic backgrounds: headmasters are predominantly highly educated and highly qualified natural science academics

Looking at the educational and professional experiences of the headmasters of the 54 provincial "double first-class" universities from 2012 to 2022, 122 104 headmasters had doctoral degrees and 17 headmasters had master's degrees. 122 headmasters had completed their undergraduate education in China, with only 20 principals having studied abroad at the master's and doctoral levels. 119 headmasters hold senior titles of professor or researcher, and 115 headmasters are doctoral supervisors. (Table 2) It is easy to see that the majority of the provincial "double-class" headmasters were trained by local educational resources in China, showing a strong local character. Although a high level of education and title does not equal a high level of management, it is an important criterion for defining 'talent' in the quantitative representation of 'competence'. Therefore, regardless of whether the "double first-class" policy is in place or not, it is a common trend for provincial "double first-class" headmasters to have a high level of education and title, and this has become a fundamental requirement for the selection of headmasters.

Table 2: Statistics on the educational and professional backgrounds of provincial "double-class" headmasters

Projects		Before "Double First"		After "Double First Class"		Total	Percentage of
		Number of people	Percentage of	Number of people	Percentage of		
Educational background	Masters	16	21%	1	2%	17	14%
	PhD	59	79%	45	96%	104	85%
	Overseas qualifications Educational experience	15	20%	5	11%	20	16%
	Academic Education Our school experience	31	41%	17	36%	48	39%
Professional background	Professor (Researcher)	72	96%	47	100%	119	98%
	PhD Supervisor	69	92%	46	98%	115	94%

In addition, in terms of academic background, more than half of the headmasters' academic expertise was mainly in science and engineering disciplines, with fewer majoring in humanities and social sciences. In terms of academic background and expertise, 66 headmasters have a scientific and technical background, 9 headmasters have a background in agriculture and forestry, 17 headmasters have a background in medicine, 6 headmasters have a background in the arts, 5 headmasters have a background in economics, 4 headmasters have a background in management, 3 headmasters have a background in education, and 11 headmasters have a background in literature, history and philosophy. (Table 3) Generally speaking, among the 54 provincial "double first-class" universities, the academic expertise of the headmasters is mainly concentrated in the four disciplines of science, engineering, agriculture and medicine. Among them, the two disciplines of science and engineering in particular have a clear tendency to "emphasize science over literature" in the selection. The experts from science and engineering disciplines, who have received more systematic training in mathematics

and logic, are more likely to develop more outstanding management skills and become outstanding management experts.<sup>[6]</sup>

*Table 3: Statistics on the number of provincial "double-class" headmasters in the category of "subject expertise"*

Projects	Before "Double First"		After "Double First Class"		Total	Percentage of
	Number of people	Percentage of	Number of people	Percentage of		
Headmaster's "Subject Matter Expertise" Category						
Science and Engineering	46	61%	21	45%	67	55%
Agriculture and Forestry	4	5%	5	11%	9	7%
Pharmaceuticals	13	17%	4	9%	17	14%
Arts	4	5%	2	4%	6	5%
Economic	3	4%	2	4%	5	4%
Management	4	5%	0	0	4	3%
Education	2	3%	2	4%	4	3%
Literature, History and Philosophy	9	12%	1	2%	10	8%

#### **4. In terms of tenure: the headmaster's term of office is relatively short and promotion is the main method of selection**

The appointment of presidents of public higher education institutions in China is decided by higher authorities, and universities have the right to suggest candidates but not to make the final decision. The provincial presidents are selected and appointed by the local provincial government. The selection of headmasters mainly comes from within the university and outside the university. The internal selection is mainly made by the Standing Committee of the Party Committee, the Deputy Secretary, the Vice President and the Secretary of the Party Committee of the university who is appointed as the headmaster. The main ways of appointment outside the university are the promotion of vice-principals of other universities to the post of headmaster, the transfer of party secretaries or headmasters of other universities to the post of headmaster, and the promotion of personnel from government departments or research institutes to the post of headmaster across the system or to the post of headmaster at the same level.

Among the 122 provincial "double first-class" headmasters, 71 have work experience at the university, including 66 who were promoted directly from the Standing Committee of the Party Committee, deputy secretary and vice president of the university to headmaster. In contrast, a total of 51 headmasters were appointed from outside without working experience at the university, including 19 headmasters who were transferred at the same level, 20 headmasters who were promoted, 14 headmasters who were promoted from government departments and research institutes, and 3 headmasters who were appointed by the party committee secretary of the university. (Table 4)

*Table 4: Statistics on the selection method of provincial "double-class" headmasters*

Selection method		Before "Double First"		After "Double First Class"		Total	Percentage of
		Number of people	Percentage of	Number of people	Percentage of		
On-campus selection	On-Campus Helicopter	41	55%	25	53%	66	54%
	On-campus transfer (part-time)	1	1%	2	4%	3	2%
Off-campus selective appointments	Promotion to a higher position	10	13%	10	21%	20	16%
	Transfer at equal grade	10	13%	9	19%	19	16%
	Cross-system promotion	8	11%	0	0	8	7%
	Cross-system lateral transfers	5	7%	1	2%	6	5%

As can be seen from the above, nearly 60% of the headteachers have grown up in the school and have a strong 'indigenous' identity. Because of their long experience in the school, they are able to grasp the strengths and weaknesses of the school's day-to-day management and development, and to

propose and implement specific measures that are relevant in the process of reform and planning. In addition, the new headteacher will have a stable and familiar network of contacts, which will facilitate the work of the new headteacher and allow him or her to make the best use of his or her talents and the best use of his or her territory, strengthening the unity and building of the management team and serving the school better. In terms of the selection method, whether it is the internal helicopter or the cross-system parachute from outside the university, according to the front and back ranks, nearly 80% of the headmasters are promoted and promoted to become the main way to select the headmasters of provincial "double first-class" universities.

The tenure of presidents of public universities in China is generally 4-5 years per term. 72 presidents of provincial "double first-class" universities have retired from 2012-2022, 16 of them have served for less than 4 years, accounting for 22%; 16 have served for 4-5 years, accounting for 22%; 12 have served for 6-7 years, accounting for 17%; 16 have served for 8-10 years, accounting for 22%; and 12 have served for more than 10 years, accounting for 22%. The number of rectors who have been in office for less than 4 years is 16, accounting for 22%; those who have been in office for 4-5 years is 16, accounting for 22%; those who have been in office for 4-7 years is 12, accounting for 17%; those who have been in office for 8-10 years is 16, accounting for 22%; and those who have been in office for more than 10 years is 12, accounting for 17%. (Table 5) As can be seen from the above, the average tenure of provincial "double-class" headmasters is only 6-7 years, and only nearly 40% of them can serve two full terms. The longest tenure was that of Xu Jiang, the former president of the China Academy of Art, who served for 19 years. The shortest tenure was that of Guo Jian, former president of Hebei University of Technology, and Gong Hao, former president of Chengdu University of Technology. Guo Jian took over as President from his post as Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee of the University for just 10 months, before being promoted to the post of Secretary of the Party Committee of the University. Gong Hao was transferred back to the position of President of Chengdu University of Technology from the position of Party Secretary of Xichang College for just over 1 year before moving on to become Party Secretary of Chengdu University of Technology. In addition, those who have served for more than 15 years include Zhang Boli, former President of Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine (15 years), Liu Xiangrong, former President of Hunan Normal University (15 years) and Xiang Benchun, former President of Shihezi University (16 years). As of 30 May 2022, the only rector who has not yet stepped down from his post for more than 10 years is Fuzhou University President Fu Xianzhi, who has been in the position for 12 years.

*Table 5: Statistics on the number of years of service of provincial "double-class" headmasters*

Length of appointment	Number of people	Percentage of
Less than 4 years	16	22%
4-5 years	16	22%
6-7 years	12	17%
8-10 years	16	22%
10 years or more	12	17%

## 5. Conclusions

Through a statistical and quantitative analysis of the gender, age, political profile, educational background, academic background and professional experience of the 122 headmasters of the 54 provincial "double first-class" universities over the past 10 years, we can find out the basic characteristics of the group of headmasters of provincial "double first-class" universities. The basic characteristics of the group of provincial "double-class" presidents are: the absolute predominance of middle-aged male presidents, the emphasis on the political identity of Communist Party members, the selection of natural science scholars with high academic qualifications and titles as the main target, the promotion as the main selection method, and the generally short tenure of office. This basic characteristic of the group has become a regular mechanism for the selection of provincial "double-class" headmasters.

However, through a comprehensive examination of the 47 new headmasters appointed after the "double first-class" strategy, it is clear that this group characteristic has not changed significantly after the "double first-class" strategy. It is clear that this cohort characteristic has not changed significantly with the introduction of the "double first-class" strategy, and that the process of selecting headmasters still adheres to a certain degree to the original standing mechanism. At the same time, some provincial governments are actively updating their headmaster selection methods based on the traditional

headmaster selection mechanism to meet the opportunities and challenges of higher education development after the 'double first-class' strategy.

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