

Chapter 2

Academic Leaders in Leading Chinese Universities

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ABSTRACT

The Double First-Class Initiative is now underway in a number of Chinese universities, of which about 36 are designated as level-A first-class universities of China. What kind of academic leaders do these universities have? In order to answer this question, the chapter firstly defines who can be classified as academic leaders at institutional level and their characteristics; secondly, it generalizes the common features of academic leaders in these universities such as education and academic research background, overseas study or research experience, work experience, and so on; thirdly, it analyzes the government policies and institutional strategies related to academic leaders so as to identify benchmark criteria (if in existence) regarding academic leaders in China's first-class universities. It also examines the extent to which these criteria or official requirements coincide with academic leaders' common features and puts forward policy advice on relevant issues.

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese higher education system functions under a state control model (Yan, 2016) under which the government plays a vital role in the top-down decision-making system. The government exerts its power on university governance by adopting a national degree system, through the unified discipline specialty catalogue and the teaching requirements, and via nation-wide regulations and code of conduct, etc. (Zhao, 2006). In such a centralized system, universities are considered as part of the governmental body at different levels. For instance, local universities are directly regulated under the provincial and municipal government while national universities are directly regulated under the Ministry of Education and other ministries. Both the national and local governments execute their influence on universities by allocating financial funding, making pivotal personnel appointments and through other issues.

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Compared with most developed countries, China is a developing country that also runs a large-scale higher education system. Therefore, the key issue is how to use limited resources effectively (Zhao, 2006). As a developing system with exogenous institutional settings, Chinese higher education has to chase global developed higher education systems through state efforts (Yan, 2016). Since the late 1980s, the Chinese government has endeavored to improve higher education quality through various approaches including building world-class universities; For instance, through the ‘211 project’, ‘985 project’ and the ‘2011 Plan’. The “211 Project”, initiated in 1995, is a plan to create 100 world-class universities capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st century. There are 112 universities in this group. The “985 Project”, announced in 1998, is a key program following on from the “211 Project”, in that it provides for the building of high-level research universities in China. This project allocated RMB 32.9 billion to assist 39 Chinese universities to attain a certain goal as world leading universities by 2007. The “2011 Plan”, established in 2011, is a national plan to enhance the innovation capacity of universities by promoting collaborations between universities, research centers, industries and other related stakeholders.

Then, in 2015, the “Double First-Class” (hereafter DFC) initiative was established to build a number of world-class universities and dozens of world-class disciplines. Different from the past projects and initiatives, the DFC initiative emphasizes the equal importance of the development of individual disciplines and universities (Yan, 2016). According to the DFC universities list that was released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, 42 universities are included and are divided into 2 levels: 36 universities are Level A, while 6 are Level B. All Level-A and 3 Level-B universities belong to the “985 project” group. Three of the “211 project” universities are also included in Level B, which are local universities from Yunnan Province, Henan Province, and Xinjiang Autonomous Region, respectively.

All of these initiatives pose both opportunities and challenges to individual universities. For those designated as DFC universities, on one hand, this means an adequate flow of financial support and plenty of opportunities; on the other hand, they are widely exposed in the beam of public supervision. The only thing they can do is to fulfill the public understanding of being DFC universities, i.e. they must verify that they are worthy of state funding. They have been pressured to demonstrate greater accountability on issues of access, cost containment and learning outcomes (Rich, 2006). In such circumstances, leaders of these universities are crucial. They have to facilitate change to enable their universities to survive the golden period. Since universities are communities of scholars, the leaders, especially the academic leaders, will have to exercise their leadership within settings different from those in other sectors in terms of institutional purposes, cultures and expectations (Moore & Diamond, 2000).

There have been quite a few studies of the institutional leaders at different levels in China’s leading universities and their role in promoting academic progress (Guo, 2012; Huang, 2015; Wang et al., 2018); however, few have touched upon the topic of academic leaders in Chinese universities. Therefore, this study aims to define who the academic leaders in Chinese universities are and to identify what attributes the academic leaders should possess to accomplish their task of leading a university? In order to answer these questions, this study intends to conduct a data analysis of the academic leaders of the 36 Level-A DFC universities in China.

The term academic leaders in this study refers to those who have formal managerial positions in a university including presidents and vice presidents responsible for academic affairs, for instance, research, teaching affairs, discipline construction, postgraduate degree programs and so on (Bolden et al., 2012).

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