

A Dual System of Chinese University Governance: Perceptions of Employees and Students

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Abstract: *In the leadership of higher education globally, national governments play their role differently, and nowhere more so than in China, where the relationship between Chinese institutions and the government is significantly different from that experienced by Western institutions. In essence, what exists in Chinese higher education institutions is a dual system of university governance, which involves, on the one hand, the Communist Party Committee, and on the other, the university president, administrators and faculty. This paper presents an exploration of the dual managerial system in a university in southern China that is less than ten years old. Is a dual system of leadership the most suitable one for universities in today's China, given the increasingly rapid pace of changes in the educational landscape? This case study aims to explore how this dual system is perceived by staff and students, by examining their experiences of a twin-pronged leadership system. A qualitative approach is employed in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of their university experiences. Results illustrate a system that works effectively mainly because of the personalities involved, though tensions are increasingly emerging and, in the future, will most likely have to be managed more purposefully, to respond to an ever-changing higher education environment.*

Key Word: *Leadership; University governance; China; Dual system.*

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I. Introduction

The context of leadership and governance is the situation in which it is observed. It was Lewin (1947) who first posited that behavior and experiences in organizational research cannot be fully understood without consideration of the situation in which people are embedded (Liden & Antonakis, 2009). Researchers used to consider the context within the organization but have recently been expanding the scope of context to consider national context. As most leadership theories were developed in the Western context, leadership phenomena in the Chinese context have thus far been largely overlooked and thus little understood by those outside China (Li, 2016; Zhang et al., 2012).

Recent years have seen unparalleled growth in China's higher education sector, whether measured by growth in the number of institutions, degree programs, faculty members, or students. Such growth needs to be carefully managed by university leadership, with strategies for sustainable development in place. In China, institutional policies and development strategies must comply with national policy. National policies are therefore the primary guidelines for higher education institutions. In China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) holds the central leadership above the State Council and its ministries and Chinese higher education institutions are under the governance of the central and local governments. However, the national and institutional policy making process for higher education is complicated, due to the intertwined relations of the government and the CCP. Where internationalization of higher education institutions is concerned, the complications are magnified. The government and the CCP have never been clearly separated and distinctions between decision makers are not clear (Pettersen, 2011).

The CCP not only has the power, but it is also involved in the policy-making. At the national level, the Party (CCP) makes educational policies in three ways: firstly, the CCP makes a decision directly; secondly, the CCP makes policies together with the Central Government or the State Council; and thirdly, the CCP provides guidelines and commits the Ministry of Education (MOE) to making specific policies. Most specific Chinese educational policies have been made in the third way (Pettersen, 2011).

The university in this study is a relatively new one by Chinese standards, being less than ten years old. As with other universities in China, there are two lines of administrative structure, namely, the university president-led administration and the university Party Committee Secretary-led university Party Committee. The highest position of the University Party Committee is the Party Committee Secretary. The Higher Education Law of PRC 1998 clarified the responsibility and position of both the university Party Committee and the president's administration. The task of the university Party Committee is to ensure that the university follows the CCP's guidelines and to take responsibility for the political education of university administrators, teachers

and students. The Law also clarifies that the president's administration should take all the responsibility under the leadership of the university Party Committee. Thus, the Party Committee Secretary is empowered with overall governance, which in reality looks stronger than that of the university president, though they are supposed to be in tandem (Yang, 1995; Wen, 2014).

The university in this study has a male president and a female Communist Party Secretary, in common with many universities in China (Wang et al., 2013; Zhao & Jones, 2017). Given the absolute authority of the CCP, the administrative departments in Chinese universities are usually executive agencies of the CCP (Wang et al., 2014). In contrast with Western universities, the majority of middle-level teams in Chinese universities are Party members. This political structure is an especially important contextual feature when a university wishes to internationalize at the institutional level, as is the case with the university in this study.

II. Literature Review

Many researchers in the Chinese context state that, until recently, research studies in higher education have tended to focus on the English language and scholarly publication, not on management at university (Li & Hu, 2017).

Higher education governance in China

Under the dual system of governance in China, the president has overall responsibility under the leadership of the primary committees of the Chinese Communist Party, according to Article 39 of Higher Education Law of People's Republic of China (1999). Article 39 states that in higher education institutions run by the State, the system shall be applied under which the presidents take overall responsibility under the leadership of the primary committees of the Chinese Communist Party. Such committees are charged with supporting the presidents in exercising their functions and powers independently and responsibly. In exercising leadership, the committees shall adhere to the principles and policies of the Chinese Communist Party, provide guidance for ideological, political and moral education in higher education institutions, decide on the internal structure and directors of departments, management systems and other, as well as ensuring all the tasks centering on the training of students are carried out.

To complement Article 39, Article 41 states that the president of a higher education institution undertakes overall responsibility (under the leadership of the institutional CCP Committee) for the institution's teaching, research and administrative affairs, including human resources, budget, operations, plans for development, internal structure, enrolment, etc.

The CCP Committee supervises the president and the president plays the administrative role and is responsible to the CCP Committee in the university. Although the legal position of the CCP and the president are distinct, in practice, conflict is common, as the relationship is often extremely complicated. Luo and Sun (2011) conducted a survey that showed the academic background of Party Secretaries can be weak, with little experience in scientific research. This is due to the fact that they are primarily political appointees, which can add to the complicated relationship (Yang, 1995).

Wu and Wu (2012) summarize the dual system as having four fundamental characteristics: a) the CCP occupies the central leading position in higher education institutions, b) the president is a legal representative and the highest administrative leader under the leadership of the CCP, c) the implementation of the CCP leadership relies on the president's overall responsibility and d) the relationship between the president and the professors who are teaching also needs to be considered. In addition, the dual system should take into consideration the advisory body for institutional development.

The entrepreneurial nature of today's universities

In China, although the same could be said of most countries, universities have a crucial role in promoting entrepreneurship and contributing to the nation's growth, through supplying research-based knowledge. Singapore's national university is heralded as being an example of today's more commercially-minded higher education institutions, with an emphasis on start-ups and high-quality research that contributes to industrial growth (Wong et al., 2011). Singapore has been successful and innovative in attracting foreign talent and fostering an entrepreneurial mindset in students, something which China has sought to emulate.

An increased focus on policies to promote entrepreneurial activities at the university level is not without challenges, as the effects on academics and staff need to be considered (Gray et al., 2007). Such policies can lead to changes in the working environment of academics and staff, and can also affect students, as the goals and feelings of all these stakeholders will ultimately influence the effectiveness of such policies. Their feedback needs to be continually sought (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009) on university policies, as an institution's reputation can be at stake.

Contorted leadership

Chinese leadership highlights the role of social governance in allocating the resources which organizational leaders scramble for. Many leaders do things that are different from what they say they want to do, leading to a contradiction characterized as contorted leadership in a study that underlines the frequent inconsistency between leaders' cognition and behavior (Zhang & Zhang, 2014). This is different to the Western context, which is more influenced by market forces, whereas hierarchy is central to understanding the Chinese context.

Paternalistic leadership

Paternalistic leadership (Cheng et al., 2004; Farh & Cheng, 2000) is considered as a blend of authoritarianism, benevolence and moral integrity, or morality. Authoritarianism is demonstrated by leader's behaviors such as control, believing that followers are not very competent, and moralistic behavior. Benevolence is categorized as treating followers almost like family members, showing holistic concern for followers and protecting them. Leader morality comprises unselfishness and leading by example, or being a role model. Although some researchers argue that these elements coexist and characterize paternalistic leadership as a whole (Wu et al., 2012), others, such as Aycan (2006) and Farh and Cheng (2000) believe that paternalistic leadership is not a simple, one-size-fits-all construct. Instead, it has become increasingly common to treat these elements of authoritarianism, benevolence and morality as leadership styles under the broader umbrella term of paternalistic leadership (Lin & Sun, 2018).

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership has been associated with personal and organizational changes and high performance (Bass & Riggio, 2006). As such, it comprises four sub-dimensions:

- a) idealized influence, in which the leaders are admired, respected, and trusted;
- b) inspirational motivation, which reflects how leaders motivate / inspire employees by providing meaning and challenge in their work;
- c) intellectual stimulation, or stimulating employees' efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, and approaching old situations in new ways; and
- d) individualized consideration, which involves leaders paying more attention to each individual follower's needs by acting as a coach or mentor (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Subsequent studies have consistently suggested that transformational leadership is related to followers' positive attitudes and performances (Chan & Mak, 2014; Perko et al., 2014). This means it may be more likely to encourage employees to provide constructive suggestions for their organizations. For example, a transformational leader may personally interact with employees, allowing and encouraging them to express themselves freely (Svendsen & Joensson, 2016). Transformational leaders also empower employees to question the status quo and think differently (Schmitt et al., 2016; Duan et al., 2017). Such leaders are seen as more likely to encourage employees' psychological safety, which may motivate employees to speak up (Detert & Burris, 2007; Liu et al., 2010). Therefore, transformational leadership is seen as having a positive correlation to encouraging positive self-perception among employees, allowing them to express themselves freely (Wang et al., 2019).

These studies follow on from the cross-culture GLOBE program, which found that leadership attributes such as charisma, being inspirational, and being visionary are universally endorsed (Den Hartog et al., 1999). This is seen to be because transformational leadership speaks to followers' moral needs, just like moral leadership. Just like moral leadership, the collective interest takes precedence over individual interests. The transformational leader is a role model that others aspire to emulate (Yaffe & Kark, 2011). Research on transformational leadership in China reveals that it resonates favorably with Chinese employees, especially where identification, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment are concerned (Cheng et al., 2004).

Follower power-distance orientation and leadership preferences

Informing the dependent relationship between followers and leaders, Hofstede (1997) identified power distance as a dimension for analyzing national culture. Subsequent research (see, for example, Kirkman et al., 2009) advocated for the variable of individual power distance orientation as shaping their cognition about what behaviors, skills and personality characterize an effective leader. Therefore, power distance orientation relates to an individual's beliefs about status, authority and power distribution in organizations. Individuals with a high power-distance orientation are mentally dependent on their leaders. In this scenario, inequalities between supervisors and subordinates are both expected and accepted. Such individuals rely on leaders' directives without expecting explanation, defer to leaders' instructions and are unlikely to question leaders. In contrast, individuals with a lower power distance orientation are less likely to depend upon their leaders.

Nepotism

Nepotism is one of the most obvious examples of how people with different cultural values perceive leadership styles differently. Having its origins in the renaissance era, when popes placed their nephews in key positions, nepotism may be defined as preferential treatment given to family members when making management-related decisions such as hiring, promotion, or salary increments. This is at odds with cultures which emphasize systems based on merit. However, nepotism is said to exist to a greater or lesser degree in most societies, as was exemplified by a 2004 study which found that approximately forty percent of Fortune 500 companies had relatives in key positions over generations (Conway, 2004).

Nepotism is essentially seen as a form of favouritism, which is defined as a leader bestowing privilege upon a person for reasons other than professional ones. Cronyism, which means to confer privileges only upon friends of the leader and patronage, which involves political parties bestowing privilege upon both friends and relatives, are two other forms of favouritism.

In Chinese organizations nepotism has been found to still widely exist (Dunfee & Warren, 2001). As a result, followers have to count on leaders' personal virtue to avoid being disadvantaged (Cheng et al., 2004). People generally tend to endorse leadership characteristics which they believe are positive and they themselves possess (Foti et al., 2012). It is clear from the literature that university governance in the Chinese context is very different to other environments (Han & Xu, 2019).

III. Research Question and Method

This study is a case study of how a dual system of university governance affects staff and student behavior. Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study were:

1. How is a dual system of university governance perceived by staff and students?
2. Is a dual system of university governance the most suitable one for a university in China in today's rapidly-changing education landscape?

In this case study, purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used. This is regularly a feature of qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2013), where purposive sampling is used for the explicit purpose of choosing those who have in-depth knowledge about specific topics, due to the nature of their role and/or experience (Cohen et al., 2013). Given the nature of the study, the number of participants is not a large one, twenty in all, comprising ten students and ten staff members. Of the staff members, five are faculty members and five are in administrative positions. All are Chinese. There is no rule in non-probability sampling as to how large the sample should be. Of the ten student participants, five are male and five are female. In addition, there are five male and five female staff participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, to evaluate their perceptions of how their behavior is affected by the dual system of governance (Kvale, 2007). All participants were assured of anonymity.

As this study inquired into the knowledge of higher education governance in the Chinese context, the case study is an exploratory one, instead of being descriptive or explanatory (Yin, 2009). Consequently, this study is aimed at investigating the meaning of a dual system of governance and how it has affected the behavior of staff and students rather than at presenting a complete description of the phenomenon.

The case study approach requires the researcher to use multiple sources of evidence and provide as much information as possible (Yin, 1994; Kumar, 2011). For data collection, a triangulation approach is often used so as to guarantee reliability. In this research, semi-structured interviews, observation and documentary analysis (for example, official documents and publications) were used as the primary sources of data collection and analysis. Using documentary analysis checked the accuracy of the information given by the participants, and also supplemented information missed by the interviewees (Denscombe, 2007; Mogalakwe, 2006). Data that could not be verified by all sources were excluded in later analyses.

Constructivist grounded theory was employed, as researchers such as Charmaz (2006), state that constructivist grounded theory, which adopts the methodological procedures in Glaser and Strauss's (1967) classical grounded theory, is a good way to create meaning attached to actors' behaviors. Case study was also deemed an appropriate method, as it is an exploratory research method that emphasizes the contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Dooley, 2002). Concepts and theories began to emerge through constant comparisons between the data and the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

As the non-probability method of selecting participants employed in this study may not be representative, findings may not be applicable to China in general. However, generalizing findings was not the main aim of this study; instead, the aim was "to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it" (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 157).

IV. Results and Discussion

Five major themes emerged during data analysis, which can be described as follows: internationalization, curriculum development, vying for position, tension regarding autonomy, and fears for the future. Each of these themes will be discussed in detail below.

Internationalization

With the role of government embedded in the operation of universities in China, the path towards internationalization is not as straightforward as it might be in other contexts. Alex, a faculty member of the Department of Computer Science, elaborates: “Professors who want to go to foreign countries for training, research or to attend a conference, must submit the application to the university Party Committee for approval. So, you see, it’s not just something that’s academic. It’s not at all easy, and especially for those who have only one passport, a Chinese one. I studied and worked in the US for many years, so I have a US passport also, and I use that to travel instead, because it’s much easier. I have some colleagues who haven’t been so lucky.”

Up until this day, government approval has to be received before any staff member can go abroad on business for any reason. What this in effect means is that every day across campuses in China, areas prioritized by government receive the funding for such activities, resulting in a tight exercise of control over policies and funding. In effect, this is what the literature calls authoritarian leadership, which falls under the broader umbrella of paternalistic leadership (Cheng et al., 2004; Farh & Cheng, 2000; Lin & Sun, 2018). It can easily lead to tensions where internationalization is concerned, as this is a relatively new area of development for Chinese universities.

Kylie, an administrator who works in the area of university internationalization, sheds more light on the issues: “There are tensions quite often between the Party and the president and international office over internationalization, as we cannot always manage things in the way that is most efficient. This caused problems when we accepted the first group of international students, and in terms of the nationalities of students and even staff who join us from other countries, as there are so many unwritten rules we must obey. It’s a complicated thing, because we have a president who is very internationally aware because he worked abroad for so long, but the Party often has a different viewpoint. For example, should the international students do the military training as part of their orientation that Chinese students do? That seems like a small thing, but in practice, it’s a big thing.”

Students are similarly impacted by internationalization issues, as Amanda, a sophomore student, explains: “Why are we studying more subjects in English? Chinese is our language; Chinese is our nationality. Is it because they want to look good internationally? Is it because we have international students who can only understand English lectures? If that’s so, put them in separate classes. Many students are making their feelings known about this. Our grades won’t be as high if we have to study in English. The leadership needs to reconsider.”

In fact, what happened in some instances is that professors who were supposed to teach in English reverted to Chinese, and then extra seminars had to be held for some international students. This did not make for happy professors. Similarly, some professors who could be classed as ‘returning Chinese’ which means that they left China for graduate studies and remained abroad for many years, later returning to China, lured in the main by generous research funding opportunities, faced issues with language. For of these professors, their entire career to date had been conducted in English, and they were led to believe they would be teaching in English, due to the international image the university wanted to portray. They were not happy when students complained and said they wished to be taught in Chinese. The policy of internationalization has thus proved to be a somewhat contentious one at the university. This has received scant attention in the literature, where any focus has tended to be on international students, not Chinese students.

However, Pan, a freshman, is positive about internationalization: “One of the reasons I chose to come here was because I could see foreign students and teachers when I was here during open day. I like this vision of the university, because I can see that the numbers of foreigners are not that big, so my parents feel it’s being well managed by the leadership. There is vision there, they say. I can see people getting on well together, and I especially see the president talking to foreign professors and students. That gives me courage to approach them, and I now have a friend from Eastern Europe.”

Pan, or perhaps more accurately, Pan’s parents, see that internationalization is being carefully managed, so as to gradually lead to integration. Having the university president model the behavior that students should so is also having an effect on some Chinese students, it would seem. This is consistent with the literature on transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Chan & Mak, 2014; Perko et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2019; Yaffe & Kark, 2011), which leads to positive attitudes by followers. Even if not all attitudes are positive, one effect of transformational leadership is that it also encourages people to speak up and voice their opinions (Detert & Burris, 2007; Duan et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2010; Schmitt et al., 2016).

Curriculum development

As can be seen from student participant views above, when it comes to internationalization, there are issues with relation to language. Are there similar issues related to curriculum development? Flora, a freshman, observes: “Students tell me there is more emphasis now on curriculum development when it comes to citizenship and the Party. For me, I am happy with the way things are, as I see there is choice. I just think that there’s a lot to study. When we have ideas about new courses and what we would like to see change, we let the Party Secretary and the president know. What’s good is that they listen to us and make time to meet with us regularly. I admire the leadership here, as I think it’s strong, and I really like the Party Chairwoman, as I want to be a strong woman, like her.”

What is noteworthy about what Flora says is that there is an increasing influence of the Party on curriculum development. This is corroborated by Kat, a sophomore: “It seems like Party ideology is becoming more important. That’s ok for some students, but it takes up a lot of time, and I want to study more courses related to my area of specialization, not anything else. Of course, I can see the advantages, but I also see that curriculum seems to be more about the sciences than the humanities, and I’m not sure that’s only what we’ll need in the future.”

Actually, there is a growing focus on humanities at the university, as university leadership has decreed it is necessary for students to have a firm grounding in the humanities, as well as in their scientific specialism. This indicates that university dual leadership is responsive to the views of students, which the literature signals is necessary for the effectiveness of university policies and the growth of an institution’s reputation (Gray et al., 2007; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009).

However, as Boris, a faculty member in the Department of Engineering, cautions, it is necessary to listen to faculty and staff, as well as students, so that all stakeholders may have their voice heard: “Curriculum in many cases could be more rigorous, I feel. Many of my colleagues aboard seem to think the Chinese university system is wonderful because we’re getting higher and higher in the rankings. I tell them it’s not like this. Many university students are not interested in study. They study so hard in school to pass the gao kao, and when they come here, they coast. Once you make it into university, you’re pretty much guaranteed to graduate. This is taking a lot of effort and time to change, and the leadership listens more to students than faculty and staff. Until that changes, curriculum won’t be what it could be.”

Lisa, an administrator, agrees: “Curriculum is an area that is getting better, but more needs to be done. Some of the syllabi for new courses that professors submit to our office are really not up to standard, which tells me that the standard of teachers varies a lot in terms of quality also. Many need to have teacher training, I feel. The university prioritizes research projects and revenue over curriculum development. Curriculum generally needs to be more creative, and quality assurance processes need to be better, more exacting. I think as much attention needs to be paid to the humanities as to market-driven curricula.”

The issue Lisa raises is not only common to Chinese universities, but is increasingly a feature of higher education globally. Chinese universities are encouraged to adjust their curriculum to the demands of economic and social development, with a balance of knowledge, abilities, and ethical and ideological qualities. Faculty are expected to keep their teaching content updated and to focus more on capacity-building than knowledge delivery. As in many universities around the world, many faculty members try to avoid teaching and curriculum development duties and instead focus on research projects, which are very generously funded in China. In this university, the dual system of governance says it wants an increased focus on curriculum and teaching, yet the practice belies this, as research is more highly prized. This is a prime example of contorted leadership, where there is a difference between what leaders say they wish to do, as opposed to what actually happens (Zhang & Zhang, 2014).

Vying for position

With a dual system of governance in place, what can easily transpire is that a number of staff will jockey for position, as Paul, from the Physics department, explains: “All you need to do to understand the situation is just go to the canteen at lunchtime. If the president is there, watch who wants to sit with him, who wants to be noticed by him. Then, if the Party Secretary is there, look at how people will deal with her, to be noticed. That will tell you everything you want to know. It’s ridiculous, watching guys who are supposed to be top class academicians behave in such a way, all trying to be the favored ones.”

Such a description may appear rather comical, yet it was commented on by six out of ten staff members interviewed. Four student participants also commented on the same thing, as Olivia, a senior student elucidates: “What is funny is watching how students want to be noticed by the top, either the Party Secretary or the President. I see the faculty doing it also, but perhaps students do it more in groups, usually when they want to change a professor of their class or have exams graded more easily. It’s not how things should be, but I suppose it’s the same everywhere.”

Such scenes are perhaps commonplace in higher education students across the globe, yet in China it must lead to greater conflict, as employees try to gauge who has more power or influence at any given time. Charles, a member of the administrative staff, offers the following observation, indicating that nepotism or cronyism may be at play to some extent (Conway, 2004; Dunfee & Warren, 2001): “There are many changes in the leadership structure as the university climbs the rankings. Even though I am far from it all, I can see with my boss the tensions and the struggles. Who is loyal to the president? Who is loyal to the Party Secretary? They seem to have a good relationship, so to my colleagues and I, it seems the tensions are being created by others, who have their own agendas. What is interesting, though, is that when new people come in, they have either worked with one or the other before, and they are very keen to make their mark.”

Students are not unaware of the tensions, as Henry, a sophomore student, makes clear: “We see what is happening, we hear the rumors, because some of us have friends in the faculties and administration. People always want power, so it depends if they want political or academic power, who they will try to get to notice them. Ultimately, we respect our leaders in this university, because they work as a team and we trust them. They are real leaders and they are growing this university, making it a university of choice for students.”

It is evident from what the participants are saying that where this particular university is concerned, both the Party Secretary and university President are strong, capable leaders. It also seems apparent that they are seen to be a good team, working together to further the university’s interests. The results are consistent with studies such as the cross-culture GLOBE program (Den Hartog et al., 1999), with leadership attributes such as charisma and being inspirational recognized by both students and staff. This indicates that transformational leadership is speaking to the needs of those on campus, just like moral leadership, with the collective interest taking precedence over individual interests (Cheng et al., 2004; Yaffe & Kark, 2011). However, there are also indications of tensions.

Tension regarding autonomy

As already indicated in this study, which reflects the literature (Yang, 1995; Luo & Sun, 2011) the relationship between the CCP and the university president is a challenging issue not only in the university in this study, but in most Chinese higher education institutions; effectively constituting a barrier on some occasions, due to the primacy of political over academic concerns. The tension is succinctly described by Casey, a member of the Department of Mathematics: “It’s like a two-headed creature, except that one head is big, and the other is small. The big head is the CCP, obviously, and the small one is the president. The big head controls the small head. But make no mistake about it, because all the hands-on, day-to-day work is done by the small head. I really admire the president for what he’s doing here. I also think the Party Chairwoman is doing an excellent job, and I can see them working well together. It’s not like that everywhere.”

David, an administrator, believes that the dual system of governance means that both systems need the same skills, pointing out: “Liu Yandong (author’s note: who served as Vice Premier of the People’s Republic of China, and was a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China from 2007 to 2017) said that the Party Committee Secretary and presidents should have high quality in both the political and education, being a politician who knows education and educator who observes the politics. I think this is a good way of saying it, as both need to be responsible, both need to be leaders, both need to earn respect, both need to be accountable. I think that is what we have here, and it works.”

Mark, a senior student, voices the following opinion: “I spent last semester at university in the US, and loved it there. It’s a completely different system from here, and opened my eyes to many things. Don’t misunderstand, please, as I love this university, but I think the president is responsible for everything but doesn’t have a lot of power. The Party has all the power, but they are often too slow to change and do things in a different way.”

This is an astute observation from a young man about to graduate. Control may ultimately limit creativity, as Sky, a junior student, touches upon: “I love the president, but feel he is confined sometimes. His career has been so amazing, and I respect him so much, but sometimes I wonder why more things aren’t happening here, to make it creative. I think he can’t, because he doesn’t have the power.”

This reflects the literature on entrepreneurial universities (Gray et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2011), as decisions will sometimes have to be made more quickly in order to respond to changing circumstances. Universities are rarely credited with acting quickly, and a dual system of governance can only serve to exacerbate the decision-making process.

Students are always more aware of what the context is than they are often given credit for. In this case, students clearly feel that perhaps a new paradigm is needed, where the president has more freedom to implement different things.

Fears for the future

As the university is expanding and also climbing both national and international ranking lists, thoughts will inevitably veer towards what the future holds. Taylor, from the Department of Finance, voices the thoughts of many: “When this university was established, it was specifically asked to do things differently from other universities. That’s what enabled it to do so much so quickly in the first few years, as innovation and entrepreneurship were in the university’s DNA. In the past few years, though, we can see in the faculties that that has changed, as the Party is taking a more active role. There are now more processes and procedures – what I mean is that it’s good to have systems in place, but some of the processes are antiquated and based on the party’s ideas of what the systems should be. This is going to affect us in the future, because how exactly are we going to grow? What kind of institution will we become? Politics will triumph over academics, I think.”

Yue, an administrator, agrees: “There are more Party audits now, as it seems they are worried about corruption. Every single yuan spent needs a rationale, as there have been accusations from local government that the university is not spending the money wisely. I saw this in the audit in my own department, where everything was done for a specific reason, but we found ourselves in a tricky position during the audit, trying to justify ourselves as if we had done something wrong. It means that innovation may be affected in the future, as if they don’t trust the academic side of things to do a good job. It’s changing – we can feel it in the air.”

What Yue and Taylor have understood is that even though the president should work independently in practice, the institutional Party Committee is the real decision-maker. Such a finding is consistent with the literature (Wu & Wu, 2012). This could have an adverse effect on the development of the university, as the direction the president takes depends on the Party Committee’s decisions, which in turn guarantee what the Chinese Communist Party wants. This can make the relationship between the Party Secretary and the president a tricky one to navigate.

Lennox, a junior student, is concerned with the issue of enrolment: “The number of new students seems to be growing a lot every year. We can see the university has to do what it’s told in this matter, but, this year, so many more new students were obviously not expected, because the classrooms weren’t ready at the beginning of the semester. It was a little bit chaos. If that happens again, students won’t be happy.”

In Chinese public higher education institutions, the number of new students every year is determined by the Ministry of Education, and in provincial higher education institutions, the Provincial Educational department decides the numbers. Numbers can change, and there is nothing the universities concerned can do about it. This can lead to university operations not being sufficiently prepared, as happened in this instance. This can lead to the erosion of the president’s authority, in effect providing an example of contorted leadership, where what is done may be very different to what is said (Zhang & Zhang, 2014).

Nick, a senior student, worries about future employment prospects: “So many of us are being pushed to move directly onto doctoral programs, straight from bachelor degrees. I think this is not very clever, because it’s postponing the employment of graduates. The leadership needs to work together more with industry to provide employment opportunities, because a lot of my friends who graduated last year are unemployed. There is so much importance on having more graduate programs, but the leadership should pay attention to employment more than more study. They are trying to hide unemployment problems in statistics, and that is disappointing, because we trust the leadership, we respect the leadership”.

What emerges from what Lennox and Nick have to say is that a dual system needs to be accompanied by a unified strategic plan, so that future development is sustainable. Currently, a number of students seem to be unsure of what the university’s strategic direction is. This is consistent with the literature (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009), which argues that in the case of entrepreneurial universities, student feedback needs to be sought and adhered to, as their attitudes and feelings will ultimately affect much of the university’s reputation.

Overall, the results show that both staff and students yearn for moral leadership from the dual system, which they attach high expectations to. Such a high expectation of moral leadership has been confirmed as an aspect of Chinese implicit leadership theories. On the other hand, staff and students’ high expectations of transformational leadership would seem to confirm that many attributes of transformational leadership are universally recognized (Den Hartzog et al., 1999). The relative success of the dual system in this instance can be directly attributed to the two individuals in question – but who will follow them?

V. Limitations of the Study

This study contains a small number of participants in a young Chinese university. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with the characteristics of the sample in mind. Future research can apply a stratified sampling strategy to obtain a more comprehensive picture of staff and student perceptions and preferences. Quantitative studies could also be undertaken in a number of different universities, so that a more wide-ranging picture of the perceptions of staff and students emerges.

VI. Recommendations

Currently, within the dual system of university governance, essential powers are still tightly controlled by the state, such as the heavy political and ideological imprints in university curriculum, and the appointment of presidents and party secretaries. This has worked very well thus far, if a measure of evaluation is seen as university rankings. However, with changes becoming more frequent and rapid, perhaps such a system will face greater challenges in the future. According more autonomy to university administration may lead to curriculum renewal, as well as greater innovation and entrepreneurship. Releasing a measure of control by the CCP would conceivably allow for the university to develop in a sustainable way (for example, where enrolment is concerned).

Additionally, diversifying student learning, with less of an emphasis on ideological curriculum, so as to create more globally-aware talents for the globalizing world, all the while with the CCP retaining a certain level of control over educational governance, could be very much to the benefit of the university.

VII. Conclusion

The above exploration of dual governance has presented how such a system has been transforming the higher education sector in China, while at the same time the state, through the CCP at university level, uses policies to influence the practices of the university in areas such as admission and curriculum. Although this may be perceived as less than ideal by other cultures, it reflects the influence that Confucian values still have on the Chinese higher education system.

There is much to admire in the system of dual governance, as it in one way serves the function of provision of checks and balances. It does seem, however, to depend to a large degree on the working relationship between the Party Secretary and the university president. Thus, the dual system of governance raises the question of how Chinese universities can reconcile the academic with the practical and operational, adapting their structures accordingly. Increased efficiency will be necessary, if quality and innovation are to be maintained.

Viewed through the lens of those who are most directly affected by the dual system of governance, staff and students, it seems that more academic freedom, rigor and autonomy is necessary, to fuel sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation.

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