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Investigating Chinese Educational Leader’s Conceptual Change: From Directive to Collaborative Leadership?

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Abstract: This paper reports some findings from an interpretative study which investigated the impact of an Australian leadership development offshore course upon the conceptions held by a group of Chinese educational leaders. The findings revealed that most participants tended to develop more complex understandings of leadership throughout the course. The study identified a general shift from task/directive orientations to motivation/collaborative orientated leadership conceptions. Five themes emerged from the findings: a) role of leader: operational implementer vs. visionary strategic planner; b) leadership approach: directive vs. participative; c) relationship between leaders and staff: command and obey vs. collaborate and participate; d) creating goals: idiosyncratic wills vs. shared vision; e) leading process: task oriented vs. motivation oriented. Before the course, most respondents seemed to value strong individual leadership and collaboration amongst teams of leaders. After the course, their conceptions tended to move to more complex perspectives of visionary, consultative and distributed leadership. They seemed to have attached more importance to motivating and engaging staff to shared visions and organizational goals. The study suggests that humanistic and shared leadership should be further promoted in Chinese educational institutions given the changing and networked nature of the world, although this change is a long and incremental process. The author argues that an open, positive and discerning attitude will facilitate expanded leadership conceptions and strategies in an international education context.

Keywords: educational leadership, transnational education, inter-cultural study

Context

The internationalisation of higher education is becoming the trend across the world. In Australia, universities are increasingly concerned about the need to enrol international students, and to open offshore campuses or offer offshore courses. Australia was one of the first countries to use the term “transnational education” in the early nineties as it wanted to differentiate between international students recruited to Australian campuses and those who were studying for Australian degrees offshore (Knight, 2005). Around 53,000 transnational students were enrolled in Australian universities in 2002, which represented more than one third of the international students in Australian universities. Fees paid to Australian universities constituted around one quarter of the $4.2 billion revenue in 2002, and offshore programs constituted a growing proportion of this revenue (IDP, 2002b). Global demand for transnational higher education is predicted to rise to 7.2 million transnational students by 2025. It is estimated that the total demand for international higher education in Australia will exceed 996,000 students and transnational programs will account for 44% of this demand (IDP, 2002a, p. 3).
Given the size and rate of increase of the transnational student population, there is a profound need to consider the learning and teaching situations that lie at the heart of transnational education. There is a growing body of literature dealing with transnational education. Most of the research and policy literature published until now has focused on government regulation of trade in education services (DEST, 2005; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001), guidelines for good practice in transnational education (Connelly et al., 2006; OECD Secretariat, 2003; UNESCO and OECD, 2005), quality assurance and maintenance of standards (Castle & Kelly, 2004; Jones, 2001; van Damme, 2000; Ziguras, 2001), language, pedagogic and cultural issues in transnational education settings (Briguglio, 2000; Greenhotz, 2000; Pyvis & Chapman, 2005; Singh, 2004; Tsolidis, 2001), pre-departure training and professional development of academics in a transnational context (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003; Leask et al., 2005), and academics’ anecdotal accounts of teaching in particular transnational programs (Bodycott & Walker, 2000; Clark & Clark, 2000; Debowski, 2005). However, there are relatively few published research studies on offshore teaching and learning, particularly from the perspective of Chinese students (Bennington & Xu, 2001; Nield, 2004).

Rationale

The specific impetus for investigating Chinese educational leaders’ conceptions in this study came from two issues. The first issue concerned the relative absence of empirical studies about offshore teaching and learning situations, particularly from Chinese students’ perspective. China is the largest and one of the most important markets for Australia’s international education sector (AEI, 2006). An in-depth investigation about how Chinese participants perceive the learning process and content of a Western leadership development program is timely and has the potential to enrich transnational education research. Chinese leaders hold conceptions which are greatly shaped by leadership traditions as well as social, economical and cultural contexts in China. Leadership traditions in China tend to focus on hierarchy, directive leadership approaches, and the moral development of individual leaders (see Bush & Qiang, 2000; Child, 1994; Wong, 2001). Recent Chinese scholars have argued for more participative, strategic and visionary forms of leadership in the changing context in China (Feng, 2002; Huang & Cheng, 2001; Wen, 2006). Many contemporary Western leadership theories emphasize shared vision and distributed leadership. Harnessing the cognitive power of organizational members and cultivating leadership at different levels seem to offer a way to meet the challenges facing educational leaders in a complex changing context (Gronn, 1999, 2003; Lakomski, 2001). Hence, there arises a need to investigate how Chinese leaders perceive Western leadership and relate different perspectives to their practice.

The second issue came from a growing awareness of the internationalisation and globalisation of educational policies, without sufficient attention given to cultural differences and diversity. It is acknowledged that leadership is a value-laden concept (Sergiovanni, 2001), which is constructed within a social milieu comprised of multiple, overlapping, and constantly shifting contextual factors (Walker, 2006). The importation of substantive ideas from one cultural context to another can be beneficial but should be undertaken with sensitivity and care (Ribbins & Gronn, 2000). In an increasingly globalised world, where the exchange of information among educational leaders is more widespread, understanding intercultural exchange is becoming increasingly necessary. The automatic application of Western educational leadership theories, policies and practices into non-Western countries without alignment with the contextual factors is problematic. It is therefore advisable to adopt a culturally sensitive and culturally conscious perspective, and to be cautious about cultural imperialism or policy cloning (Bush & Qiang, 2000; Cheng, 1998; Dimmock & Walker,
1998; Walker & Dimmock, 2000). As argued by Walker (2006, p.2), “the transportation of leadership development across cultures move beyond surface concepts and their too-neatly attached content and focus more on the processes that place these in context and, thereby, respect deeply embedded cultural norms.” Hence, it is unwise to assume that theories of leadership espoused in Western cultures are universally applicable to Chinese culture. Nor should it be assumed that Western leadership theories are superior to those developed in the Chinese context. It is important to understand how national and indigenous cultures influence and modify the uptake of ideas imported from Western countries.

In light of these two issues discussed above, this study explored the conceptions and personal experiences of a cohort of Chinese educational leaders who participated in an Australian offshore leadership development course in China from 2002 to 2003 (Wang, 2004). Some of the key findings of this research have been reported elsewhere (Wang, 2005, 2006, 2007). This paper, however, focuses primarily upon the Chinese participants’ self-perceived conceptual change of leadership after undertaking this course. To date, relatively few studies employ in-depth investigation to examine leadership beliefs and understandings from a perspective of intercultural dialogue. A better understanding of Chinese leaders’ perspectives of leadership after exposure to alternative educational ideas will facilitate their professional development in a globalised world and add value to their leadership practice. Furthermore, investigating the interaction of Chinese leadership culture with contemporary Western culture has the potential to expand the leadership discourse itself. Since leadership perceptions and practices are greatly affected by the national culture and the values held by the leaders, this particular paper attempts to fill the void and answer the following question: When East meets West, will Chinese educational leaders’ conceptions of leadership change?

Research Method

The research design of the study was a pre- and post-comparison case study inspired by the phenomenographic approach. Phenomenography is an approach to research that has been used to help understand the key aspects of the variations in the experiences of groups of people (Marton & Booth, 1997). Phenomenographic methodology was utilized because it was considered to provide full descriptions that allow coherent meaning to evolve from the findings (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2003). This study is also a single case study where qualitative inquiry dominates and it has strong naturalistic, holistic and cultural interests (Stake, 1994). The study, undertaken from a phenomenographic perspective, sought a better understanding of Chinese participants’ conceptions by making a comparison between their perceptions prior to and after undertaking an Australian course.

The offshore course under study, Master of Educational Leadership, was delivered by an Australian university in a bilingual flexible mode in three intensive teaching brackets of six subjects at Hangzhou, China from 2002 to 2003. An in-depth and semi-structured interview technique was utilized. Two sets of interviews were conducted in April 2002 and April 2003 to examine the conceptions of 20 participants drawn from the course. The average time for each interview in both sets of interviews was approximately one hour. Twenty of Fifty-two educational leaders from Zhejing Province, China who enrolled in the course were involved in this study. They were selected to maximize the possible variation, ranging from varied disciplines, ages, genders, teaching, professional and sectoral experience (see Trigwell, 2000). The interview participants comprised 15 males and 5 females, approximately proportional to the gender ratio in the cohort. Eight school principals, 6 university administrators, and 6
system officials participated in this study. The ages of the participants ranged from 31 to 52 and the mean age was 38 years old.

Each interview was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and analyzed following the principles of phenomenographic analysis. The researcher coded the 200 pages of transcripts based on emergent themes and categories. Initial coding was typically descriptive and of low inference, whereas subsequent coding integrated data by using higher-order concepts (Punch, 1998). The transcripts were also summarized as a series of typical vignettes that focused on individual’s conceptions of learning and leadership. The researcher, also an accredited translator, transcribed the interviews and translated relevant sections of the transcripts from Chinese into English. The responses were sorted into conceptual categories on the basis of similarities and differences. The researcher first analyzed the transcriptions and identified sets of categories of descriptions meant to describe the key aspects of the variation within the set of transcripts as a whole. The researcher then reviewed the transcripts according to the designated categories, revised the categories and the relationships, and revisited the transcripts and categories until stable sets of categories and relationships were developed (see Martin et al., 2003).

Findings and Discussion

The following themes indicate a conceptual change path undergone by most participants in this study. The findings relate to the following five themes of conceptions of leadership: role of leader; leadership approach; relationship between leaders and staff; creating goals; and leading process. Respondents were not entirely clustered around their respective extremes before or after the course. They tended to occupy the full range, from one end (a task/directive orientation) to the other end (a motivation/collaborative orientation). However, the distribution was decidedly skewed, with responses before the course toward one end and responses after the course toward the other. Pseudonyms were used in this study in order to preserve the confidentiality of participants. Quotations presented in this paper were translated from Chinese into English.

Role of Leader: Operational Implementer vs. Visionary Strategic Planner

Before the course, around half of the respondents equated the role of a leader with that of a manager, or regarded leadership and management as similar concepts. They appeared to link their work to more operational functions or emphasise the difference between a leader and manager in terms of levels of position in a hierarchical structure. In other words, leaders were often viewed as high-level managers. Middle level managers were not regarded as leaders in the real sense. Although they may sometimes perform leadership roles, they were mainly regarded as line managers in functional departments, who were expected to carry out policies or implement plans issued from the top. General or teaching staff members were considered as operators who rarely take up leadership roles.

This view appeared to be shared across the three sectors. For example, a school principal (Luke) considered himself as an implementer or “transmitter” who receives the policies or instructions from higher administrative levels, and then “transmits them to the teaching staff.” Another system official (Felix) viewed a leader as a manager, who “has positional power and ability to manage others”. A university official (Richard) explained that in a strict sense he is not a leader but “a middle level manager or implementer”. He insisted that only those who hold positions at the university level, like university presidents, or school principals can be
regarded as leaders. These responses suggested their conceptual confusion about leadership and management. They also exemplified a bureaucratic conception of leadership.

After the course, many respondents emphasised they had “clarified their conceptual confusions about leadership and management” (Tony). These two concepts were viewed by many interviewees as different but overlapping sometimes. This suggests a shift in their perspectives from a managerial orientation focused on micro level operation and implementation to a visionary orientation focused on macro level decision-making and strategic planning. They began to place an emphasis on a forward-looking leader who commits followers to a shared vision rather than on forceful top-down implementation. They also stressed that a leader is sometimes a manager who emphasises implementation and a manager can also take on the role of a leader who focuses on strategic planning.

For instance, many respondents elaborated on their understandings about differences between leadership and management. It is interesting to note that principals tended to regard themselves as both leaders and managers who take on the roles of facilitators and implementers in school contexts (e.g. Hilary, Jeremy). System officials and university administrators appeared to show more interest in clarifying their previous conceptual confusions and emphasised their role as leaders. A system official (Eric) claimed that “a leader is a decision maker at macro level and a manager is an implementer at micro level”. A university administrator (Tony) commented:

Management is like putting a ladder against a wall in a right way, while leadership is like putting a ladder against a right wall. Leadership is doing right things while management is doing things rightly. Leadership is at a macro strategic level while management is at micro operational level. Management is technically oriented while leadership is artistically oriented (Tony).

Another system official (Bruce) further illustrated the difference between leadership and management. He placed an emphasis on a leader who plays a decisive role in planning a shared vision of an organisation.

Management is related to rules, regulations, accountability, control and obedience. Leadership has broader meanings in addition to control. It is mainly about creating a vision and making the team or organisational members commit to the shared vision. Leadership emphasises strategic planning and management emphasises tactics. A leader acts as a director of board while a manager acts as a professional agent (Bruce).

Many respondents believed a leader should be forward looking, foresee the trend of organisational and social development, act proactively, and adopt strategic plans to achieve goals. It is suggested that leadership goes beyond the boundary of authority or power. A university administrator (Steven) considered a leader as a guide of an organisation, “who is situated at the forefront of the complex environment and organisation. A leader is expected to respond quickly and proactively to the external environment”. Another system official (Tony) expressed similar views and stated that “a leader is a visionary and charismatic person who directs followers to achieve certain tasks or shared organisational goals”. He insisted that “a leader is not a privileged person above others, but a visionary person ahead of others”. This suggests a major shift from managerial and operational perspectives of leadership.
Leadership Approach: Directive vs. Participative

Before the course, respondents generally believed that a leader was a head of an organisation or an official with a formally appointed position. He or she was at the top level of the hierarchical structure or organisational pyramid. A leader was also viewed as a symbol of power, authority, privilege and status. Many respondents tended to place an emphasis on solitary and directive leadership with individuals making decisions from the top of the hierarchical and bureaucratic structure. They tended to value personal wisdom, charisma and insight of the leaders rather than collective wisdom from the followers. Improving leadership in an organization often meant promoting personal qualities and moral standards of individual leaders. Empowerment, delegation and leadership distributed at various levels seemed to be often neglected.

Respondents generally placed a strong emphasis on the authoritative and unquestioned role of leaders. For instance, a leader was considered as one who “holds the official position” (Michael), “head (Tou) of an institution who has power and privilege” (Felix), or “an organiser or a boss, who directs followers to accomplish certain tasks” (Paula). Another principal (Jeremy) maintained that “the role of a leader is like the collar of a dress” because the literal meaning of an eminent leader (Ling Xiu) in Chinese is “the collar and sleeves of a dress”. The importance of a leader is therefore self-evident. A system official (Adam) also viewed a leader as a very important person in an organisation, “whose leadership abilities will determine the development of the organisation.” A typical comment was from a university administrator, William:

In China, it is hard to define leadership if we take out power. We mostly rely on influence through formal organisational structure, such as designing plans, issuing orders, implementing plans, monitoring and evaluating results. Decisions are made from the top and implemented through different layers (William).

Some respondents commented that the image of a leader or “a head” is an awesome, authoritative and even fearsome figure. For instance, a school principal (Jeremy) commented that a leader is often “at the top of a pyramid”, “hard to approach” and distant from followers who are below him or her in status. Another university administrator (Tony) also viewed a leader as the one “at the top of a strictly layered hierarchical structure”, who is often “a symbol of authority, autocracy, and awe”. It should be noted that these respondents seldom related themselves to the awesome and authoritative images of leaders. They tended to link these images to traditional leaders from strictly layered hierarchical structures. In addition to authority derived from the leading role in specific subject/discipline domain or research field, a leader’s personal charisma or affinity derived from personal qualities or morality was also highly valued by respondents. This suggests another reflection of Confucian traditions of the scholarly and moral leader (Lee, 1996; Wong, 2001). A principal (Michael) explained that “morality and personal qualities of a leader” were emphasised in Confucian traditions. A good leader should be “a moral model and set good example for others”. This conception of leadership implies that improvement of one’s leadership ability often means dedication to personal development and self-cultivation.

After the course, due to participants’ reflections and exposure to Western leadership theories, their ideas about the functions of leadership were modified or expanded. The notions of visionary and strategic leadership, consultative and collaborative leadership, and shared and distributed leadership expanded their views. Participation and involvement of organisational
members in decision-making were valued. The orientation of their leadership conceptions tended to be moved from strong, directive, solitary, bureaucratic leadership to more consultative, collaborative, collegial and democratic leadership. Collective wisdom of organisational members and active participation in decision-making process were emphasised. Improving leadership seemed to take up new meanings, such as promoting personal qualities, professionalism, moral standards, and democratic awareness of organisational members to equip them to play leadership roles in an organisation.

For example, many respondents maintained that ordinary organisational members should get involved in the decision-making process and take on leadership roles. They also explicitly proposed the notion of “teacher leadership” and “student leadership”. This view was particularly stressed by principals and university administrators. A school principal (George) explained the literal meaning of leadership (Ling Dao) in Chinese was “lead” and “facilitate”.

A leader is a guide, a facilitator and a service provider who also takes on managerial roles sometimes. A leader directs, motivates and inspires followers to accomplish tasks and achieve organisational goals. Simply managing followers is not enough for a good leader. Teachers and students should get actively involved in decision-making processes (George).

University administrators expressed similar ideas. Tony proposed distributed and participative leadership notion in a university, and believed leadership “should be shared at different levels of an organisation”. Oliver gave more complex illustrations about his understanding. This suggests a radical departure from earlier assumptions about leadership as positional power.

Leadership means a leading process, a concept, a working style, or an awareness. A person with leading awareness commits others to a common goal and common approach, for which they are mutually accountable. It is possible for a person who has no official position to play the role of leadership. Everyone including ordinary teachers may have leadership awareness or exert some influence on others (Oliver).

**Relationship between Leaders and Staff: Command and Obey vs. Collaborate and Participate**

Before the course, many participants indicated that the traditional leader-follower relationship tended to be that of “commanding and obeying” (Nathan) or “directing and conforming” (Steven). Leaders were often viewed as decision makers, organisers, planners, and coordinators while followers were supposed to be managed strictly or obey the orders from their supervisors without any questions. The decisions were often made at the top, passed down and implemented at the lower levels faithfully. A leader was often “a guide in front of followers or a whip behind others” (Jeremy) to make them conform to orders or social norms. Traditionally a leader was regarded as a decision maker and thinker. Since reflective followers may raise doubt and cause trouble in implementing plans, they were generally not encouraged. “Conformity and obedience” (Diana) on the part of the followers were essential if they were to be favoured by the leaders.

For example, most respondents emphasised “leadership as a top-down implementation process” (Kevin) rather than an interaction and collaboration between leaders and followers. In the process of accomplishing tasks, “the strict rules and regulations are supposed to be imposed rigidly” (Bruce) and “the exercise of strict control and scientific management is emphasised” (Nathan). Respondents tended to regard “a good leader as one who can manage human and physical resources well” (Felix) and “accomplish tasks in workplaces” (William).
There seemed to be “a clear division between the leaders who propose a plan and followers who implement this plan” (Richard). This suggests that a leader who has power bestowed by an official position is supposed to manage and govern others. The relationship between a leader and followers tends to focus on controlling and obeying.

Although many respondents claimed to have “team leadership” or “collective leadership” in their workplaces, hereby, team or collective leadership primarily focuses on the process of a group of leaders in an organisation working as a team to make decisions and facilitate achievement of organisational goals. Collaboration and consultation within a team of leaders are emphasised. Thus, in this conception it seems to be more appropriate to consider team leadership as teamwork among leaders who hold official positions in an organisation. Respondents generally stressed cooperation within a team of leaders and tended to equate their notion of team and collective leadership with “democratic leadership”. This view was common across school, system and university sectors. A principal (Kevin) stated that team leadership is adopted in his school. He said he is responsible for teaching and learning management while “principal and deputies meet together regularly to make important decisions”. A system official (Cindy) echoed his view. She insisted that “decisions about important issues are usually made by a team of leaders”. A university president (Oliver) proclaimed collective leadership was important in his institution. He explained the reason why he could find time to undertake the course is that his team of leaders collaborated very well and two deputies shared much of his work during his absence.

After the course, participants believed that the leader-follower relationship should be that of “collaborating and participating” (George) or “motivating and engaging” (Steven). A leader’s role as a collaborator was emphasised. The two-way interaction and communication between leaders and followers was stressed during the decision-making process. Many respondents emphasised that leadership may be an interactive phenomenon within groups, or an extensive and multi-level influence. Some interviewees clearly indicated that a leader is an ordinary member of an organisation, while someone without official titles can also exert some influence or take on leadership roles. Their awareness of increasing extensive participation and exerting influence upon others seemed to be raised or reinforced after undertaking the course. Many respondents indicated that in order to survive and thrive, and achieve sustainable development in a competitive and complex world, it is important for an educational organisation to promote a collaborative relationship between leaders and followers, utilize the wisdom and knowledge of organisational members, and harness their collective cognitive power (see Lakomski, 1999, 2001). For instance, many respondents expanded their previous views about “team leadership” and emphasised that in participative leadership, leader and followers are collaborators, indicating an equal relationship rather than a hierarchical natured relationship characterized by “control and obey” (Bruce) or “order and implement” (Steven). This view was shared across the three sectors. A university administrator (Oliver) emphasised:

Leadership is not limited to a particular person or position. It is an interpersonal relationship, a force of influence, or a change of leadership style…. I believe leadership emphasises a relationship of cooperation and coordination (Oliver).

His view was echoed by another school principal (Jeremy), who reported significant change in his conceptions of leadership. He viewed a leader as a key figure in an organisation, “who is a proposer and designer of organisational goals, an implementer in the operational process, a monitor and evaluator of this process”. He went on to make further illustrations:
In the process of achieving organisational goals, leaders and followers are collaborators. My previous belief was that a leader is a pioneer or a fire fighter, who is at the front to guide followers or urge them with whips at the back. I now believe a leader should get involved in the process and become an organisational member. With regard to leadership, control and guidance were emphasised, but now cooperation and collaboration are stressed (Jeremy).

Creating Organisational Goals: Idiosyncratic Wills vs. Shared Vision

Before the course, many respondents regarded a leader as the decision-maker who has positional power or non-positional authority. Some interviewees indicated that “personal wishes or wills of a leader often determined the organisational goals” (Felix) and they were implemented through top down enforcement. “The feasibility of such goals was seldom challenged” (Steven) and “the evaluation or moderation of proposed plans was often neglected” (Kevin). A leader was usually considered as a designer and followers were often viewed as implementers. Some respondents commented that an effective leader or team of leaders may come up with policies or plans based on consultation or collective thinking, but a mediocre leader may “rigidly follow orders from the higher administrative levels or propose empty slogans” (Bruce).

Respondents generally admitted the strong influence of Chinese leadership traditions on their ideas. Some, particularly system officials, criticized traditional overemphasis on task orientation and neglect of the wills of followers. These comments suggest a strong bureaucratic culture in educational systems. Decision-making power tended to belong to leaders rather than staff while consultation and delegation were often neglected in practice. A system official (Bruce) commented “the wills and wishes of leaders rather than followers are often emphasised” and followers are supposed to obey what a leader has decided. One of his counterparts (Diana) made more radical criticism. She stated the concept of leader is often associated with position, power and authority. She commented “people often hold negative attitudes towards leaders, who usually climb the ladder relying on nepotism and personal networks”. She was also critical of bureaucratic and hierarchical leadership traditions.

Traditional Chinese leaders are endorsed with official power and authority. They are often autocratic and patriarchal. Their wills and decisions are usually imposed on the organisational members through the strict hierarchical structure. As a leader, how to manage the staff well is most important. Managers are expected to strictly implement plans according to the set rules and regulations (Cindy).

After the course, participants emphasised that wisdom and the cognitive power of the collectives should be fully utilized in decision-making process. Many respondents indicated that such ideas were nothing new to Chinese leaders, as traditional Chinese culture also attaches much importance to collective wisdom. For example, as a saying goes, “three ordinary persons’ wisdom is greater than that of Zhuge Liang” (a saint in Chinese history). However, the active participation and extensive consultation of followers in decision-making processes in reality seemed to be often neglected in contemporary Chinese educational institutions, as indicated by many participants. They emphasised that collective thinking comes up with good ideas. Consultative and collaborative leadership may gradually replace the predominant solitary and directive leadership in bureaucratic institutions. According to some interviewees, every member in an organisation ideally becomes a learner, thinker and implementer. A leader is expected to be an organiser or synergizer of collective wisdom in order to motivate others to achieve the organisational goals. Many respondents seemed to
place great emphasis on visions shared and owned by the organisational members. A leader’s role in shaping, forming and communicating the shared visions was also stressed. The role of a leader was expected to commit organisational members to the shared version by engagement, motivation, and persuasion rather than by coercion or command.

Some respondents indicated that they began to realize being a solitary visionary leader was not enough since a leader should “get staff involved in shaping the vision and make them own the vision” (Steven). Their perspectives about organisational goals or vision were broadened after the course, because vision is no longer limited to “keen insight” or “an overall perspective” (Bruce) of individual leaders. It is more of a common goal owned and shared by all organisational members. In other words, creating a vision or strategic planning was no longer regarded as the job of official leaders. Involvement of organisational members in forming the vision or strategic plan was now considered equally important. The notion of shared vision and motivation was heavily emphasised in achieving organisational goals. This insight was shared across school, system and university sectors.

For instance, a school principal (Hilary) believed a leader should not be the ultimate decision maker of everything. She proclaimed her role is to “solicit good ideas from organisational members, help them to reach consensus, and then commit them to the shared vision.” She also placed an emphasis on teamwork and collective wisdom of everyone in the leadership process. Her view was echoed by system officials. Bruce used to regard a leader as one “who has personal charisma and proposes encouraging slogans or goals at appropriate times so that others can follow.” He began to realize that proposing a slogan was far from being enough. He believed “the slogan should be a shared vision, which comes from followers, shared and owned by them”. Cindy expressed similar ideas. She insisted that a leader “engages all organisational members to the common goals and fully tap their potentials.” Other university administrators (e.g. Oliver, Steven) also placed an emphasis on motivating and engaging organisational members to achieve shared vision or goals.

Leading Process: Task Oriented vs. Motivation Oriented

Before the course, many respondents tended to focus on accomplishing certain tasks or carrying out policies in a top-down manner. Decision-making power seemed to invariably belong to a hierarchy, and implementation was meant to be the task of followers, who were supposed to follow the orders from the top and accomplish the set tasks. Some respondents indicated that a leader generally placed an emphasis on task orientation or “set the goal and just do it” (Bruce). Insufficient attention tended to be paid to motivating staff or “getting feedback, monitoring the plan, making evaluations, and adopting adjustments and modifications” (Kevin) in the decision-making and implementation processes.

For instance, a school principal (George) insisted that the goal of leadership work is “to manage human and physical resources well and achieve organisational goals”. Another principal (Kevin) believed the role of a leader is to design a plan, and then organise followers to implement this plan and accomplish certain tasks. He considered a leader as the decision maker and “followers as implementers, who should carry out the plan faithfully.” A system official (Felix) expressed similar ideas: a good leader is one “who can manage followers well and accomplish tasks”. Another university administrator (William) emphasised that a leader is expected to “manage and govern followers well” and “get the job done”, while the relationship between a leader and followers is often that of “ordering and obeying”.

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After the course, many respondents attached more importance to motivating and engaging staff to shared visions or organisational goals. They also tended to have raised or reinforced their awareness of strategic planning and implementation. The leading process is not simply a process of decision-making and implementation; leadership also means strategic planning, motivating the staff, and adjusting the plan to accomplish the set goals. For instance, the notion of a leader as “a conductor” and “facilitator” was emphasised. A system official (Adam) used to stress the importance of personal leadership or self-cultivation but began to place an emphasis on a leader’s influence upon the followers. He believed “the main function of leadership has shifted from control and implementation to vision and motivation”. A school principal (Nathan) expressed similar ideas:

A leader is a conductor of an orchestra, a coordinator of human relationship, promoter of problem solving, and facilitator of organisational learning. A leader is not necessarily the most intelligent or capable person in an organisation, but one who can create a cohesive organisational culture to engage every one to work for a shared vision. A leader should constantly improve his mental model, engage in personal, team and organisational learning so that every organisational member committed to common goals” (Nathan)

Many respondents maintained that China is different from Western countries in terms of historical, social and cultural backgrounds, and economic development. It was therefore believed to be important to “adapt leadership practice to the local context and followers” (e.g. Bruce, Eric). It was considered inappropriate and questionable to “adopt Western leadership ideas indiscriminately without considering the contemporary Chinese context” (Steven). Some respondents also claimed that efforts should be made to integrate the essence of Chinese leadership ideas with advanced Western leadership perspectives. They made it explicit that an appropriate leadership model in China is to “integrate scientific management with humanistic approaches” (Nathan). It should be noted that many Chinese contemporary scholars also echo this view (Feng, 2002; Wen, 2006). However, it remains to be seen whether this really works in view of the seemingly conflicting philosophies and conceptions embedded in these two perspectives. A system official (Diana) placed an emphasis on “achieving a balance between democratic decision-making and scientific management”. Her view was shared by one of her counterparts (Bruce). He insisted “scientific management emphasizing control and strict regulations” should be integrated with contemporary Western management notions “which stress shared vision, consultation and empowerment”. Another system official (Felix) made similar comments and also emphasised such balance in leadership practice.

Local context, cultural background and qualities of followers need to be considered when adapting Western leadership theories. We may rationally propose that we should have flattened organisational structure and democratic management. But in reality this can hardly be achieved. We need to consider the qualities of organisational members. If their qualities are not up to the desirable standard, enforcing shared leadership or flattened structure may bring trouble to an organisation…. We need to incorporate scientific management characterised by control and strict regulations with modern humanitarian management ideas (Felix).

Some respondents further analysed the structural, cultural and social constraints. They commented that “changing entrenched ideas” and “promoting democratic awareness” will be “a long and incremental process” (e.g. George, Felix and Steven). As educational leaders, they will try to exert their influence and promote democratic processes in China. For instance,
a principal (Nathan) commented that the Chinese leaders have made great efforts in engaging followers and developing their wisdom and creativity.

Due to structural constraints, a leader is always situated in a hierarchical pyramid, separated by different layers. Vertical or top-down leadership is prevalent in such a structure, but horizontal leadership or coordination is neglected. It seems to be unrealistic to adopt democratic management or flattened structure without considering Chinese contexts (Nathan).

However, he was optimistic that Chinese leaders will promote this democratic process within their sphere of influence. A system official (Diana) shared his view.

With regard to decision-making, Western leaders seem to emphasise consultation and collective wisdom while Chinese leaders rely more on their own experience, wisdom or even positional power. Decisions may sometimes be made based on extensive inquiries, but mostly made on whimsical or sudden ideas of a leader. The percolation model is more appropriate and it will be an incremental changing process (Diana).

Many participants stressed that humanistic and shared leadership should be further promoted in China in view of the changing and networked nature of the world, although this change is a long and incremental process. This study suggests that there is a discourse of reflective exploration here which should be emphasised. It supports the claims that countries with developed traditions of leadership do not simply accept or import other cultural traditions of leadership without reflection. Although female leaders tended to more open to alternative perspectives than their male counterparts, no significant gender differences in their responses could be detected in this study.

**Implications and conclusion**

This study is limited to the perspectives of a relatively small sample of educational leaders in Zhejiang Province, a well-developed region in China. Generalisation of their conceptions to Chinese educators in other regions requires caution. Another limitation is that the study was exclusively based on the self-reports of the respondents. There might be differences between professed beliefs and embedded beliefs in practice. Moreover, interviewees were highly motivated to get something out of the course, and they were in a culture where students may tend to please the questioner. Despite these limitations, the findings of the study provide an exploratory indication of Chinese educational leaders’ conceptions in an international educational context. The findings also constitute a basis for further research.

This paper describes and analyses a developmental process in Chinese participants’ conceptions of leadership. The findings showed that most participants tended to develop more complex understandings of leadership throughout the course. This study reveals that not one single factor but a cluster of interactive influences can account for their conceptual change: exposure to a Western leadership development course and direct exposure to Western pedagogy; intellectual content; self-reflection; peer interaction; assessment and application of knowledge to workplaces. Their learning experiences and exposure to Western educational ideas and practices seemed to have led them to reflect on their inherited assumptions and to expand their perspectives.

The study suggests that leadership is value-based and contextualised. The learning and leadership conceptions and practices are context dependent and inevitably influenced by
particular cultural contexts. It is understandable that participants held beliefs and conceptions which were compatible with the existing contexts and teaching and leadership practice in China. Exposure to Western educational ideas and pedagogies has made them reflect on their own learning and leadership practice and given impetus for further reflection. This study identified a general shift from directive-orientated conceptions to collaborative-oriented leadership conceptions. The findings from this study suggest that leadership development programs across the national boundaries can be helpful for educators from developing countries to develop an international perspective and become familiar with contemporary educational ideas from other countries. They may reflect on their own perspectives and practices, and then accommodate alternative perspectives and ideas critically. The study highlights the importance of critical reflection and adaptation on the part of practitioners when importing Western educational ideas to non-Western countries. The implication of the study for leadership development in China is also significant. In addition to rational, standardized scientific management and situational contingency leadership arts, which are generally advocated in contemporary Chinese educational management and leadership, humanistic, consultative, shared leadership ideas need to be further investigated in China. The author argues that an open, positive and discerning attitude of “absorbing any essence of advanced cultural heritage from other cultures” will facilitate expanded leadership conceptions and strategies in an international education context.

References


Appendix: Interview Schedules

Initial Interview Questions

1. Could you please introduce briefly your workplace, position and job duty?
2. Please indicate critical challenges you are facing as an educational leader.
3. What are the motivators for your participating in this course? What do you expect to get from it?
4. How do you understand leadership and learning? What is your personal understanding of these concepts?
5. Do you think your perceptions and leadership practice will change after undertaking the course? Why?

Final Interview Questions

1. Could you please introduce briefly your previous training and professional experiences?
2. How did you understand learning before the course and how do you understand it now? What is your personal understanding of the concept? Has your understanding of learning changed as a result of the course? Could you illustrate in what ways your understanding of learning has changed, if any?
3. How did you understand leadership before the course and how do you understand it now? What is your personal understanding of the concept? Has your understanding of leadership in educational organisations changed as a result of the course? Could you illustrate in what ways your understanding of leadership has changed, if any?
4. How do you perceive the relationship between leadership and learning?
5. In what ways has the course helped you to respond to the critical challenges you face as an educational leader?
6. Has your leadership practice in your workplace changed as a result of the course? Could you provide examples of your behavioural change, if any?
7. Could you identify three most important learnings you have gained from the training course? Have your expectations of the course been met?