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Author(s)	Dr Yenming Zhang
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LEADERSHIP QUALITY REQUIRED OF A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT  
IN CHINA: THE NEW VERSION IN THE 1990s

Dr. Yenming Zhang  
National Institute of Education  
Nanyang Technological University  
Singapore

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Abstract: The science of leadership became a new research frontier with the academics in the People's Republic of China since the late 1980s. University presidents' quality of leadership has attracted close attention from scholars in research institutions as well as many university presidents themselves. The higher education system in China is experiencing a period of restructuring and re-adjustment in large scale since the last decade--macro restructuring that includes nationwide upgrading and establishing institutions of higher learning (1,054 by the year 1996); and micro-restructuring that consists of departmental and curricular revision within colleges and universities, to meet an increasing demand for changes of the functions of these institutions so as to adjust to the rapidly changing social and economic systems. The most striking phenomenon in higher education administration has been a switch of power-authority at the top of a university's leadership, i.e., redefinition of the role and functions of the president in the hierarchy of administrative structure. The constitutional change

is that the president has risen from the traditionally secondary position to virtually the primary position, while the Communist Party secretary steps aside from the supreme leading position to assume supervisory functions.

In this context, this paper tries to address the challenges of presidency in the new power-authority allocation within institutions of higher learning, to describe the demands of strong leadership of presidents from the society, and to identify strong leadership qualities. This paper bares the result of a research project on leadership quality of university presidents in the 1990s, based on 1) a literature review of recent research findings; and 2) interviews through correspondence with the presidents of some renowned universities in the cities of Xi'an, Beijing, Dalian, and Guangzhou. The main questions include: 1) what are the basic and crucial qualities a strong university leader must possess? 2) what personal and professional

qualifications university presidents are expected to have? and 3) how different are faculties' expectations of their leaders at present from a decade ago?

Descriptors: Higher education, leadership quality, academic leadership, presidency, university administration.

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## I. Introduction

The policy of opening China to the world and the economic reform starting in the 1980s provide main dynamics of pushing higher education to reform its system. As the reform was progressing, there appeared two noticeable phenomena in higher education: expansion of institutions and complication in programmes. Within one decade, the number of institutions of higher learning increased from 675 in 1980 to 1,075 in 1989, The Government readjusted the speed of expansion, focusing on qualitative development rather than quantitative increase. As a result, the number of institutions of higher learning by 1996 is 1,054. and enrolment increased from around 800 thousand in late 1970s to more than 2 million in late 1980s. See The Development of Education in China, 1988-1990 (presented at International Conference on Education, 42nd session, Geneva, 1990), published by the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China, September, 1990. pp. 40-41. Because the role of universities is to prepare and produce labour force with expertise, new frontiers need to be opened up and new programmes need to be established to train professionals. The expansion and complication have been challenges for university administration and have posed a push factor for universities to build and then reform its complicated administrative systems.

From the late 1980s, the State shifted the focus of Chinese higher education from expansion to improving educational quality, readjusting its structure, and raising efficiency and facilities. Towards the end of the last decade, institutions of higher learning began to have the following new characters: competition, openness, efficacy, autonomy, and comprehension in programs (Yuan, 1989). Among the above characters, one outstanding character related to aspects in higher education management is "autonomy and empowerment". With educational authorities (administrative departments of education) in the government decreasing their excessive intervention in the day-to-day operation in administrative work in universities, the management system of higher education has more power in decision-making than before. And the government only retains legislative and economic means of indirect control and regulation.

When this new type of higher education administration started to operate, people's attention was focused on qualities of administrators, and on the qualities of presidency. One of the topics of discussion among scholars and researchers has been on re-defining the role of university presidents and on their leadership qualities. The science of leadership has become an interest and focus. Leadership in institutions of higher learning has become more complicated than before and requirements are much higher (Li, 1989). Both practitioners and researchers have realized that theories of leadership, both from the West and from the East, can meet social needs in China (Han, 1990). In the following sections, the new role of presidency and leadership qualities are addressed.

## II. The New Role of Presidency

A Costar

During the first stage of higher education establishment and





using these technical skills, the leader needs to possess such crucial qualities as being "holistic, strategic and creative" (Shen, 1989) so that he can have a blueprint of the university in his mind instead of being short-sighted and paying attention to trivial things.

To be an effective leader, the president has to have a close relationship with others, and adopt a democratic style. Before a major decision is made, he needs to do some investigation, and to consult his "brain trust", that is, the university advisory committee (Zhao & Shen, 1989).

In sum, university leaders are required to have a high level of professional establishments, politically and correctly understanding the government's policies, and strong managerial competency and leadership skills (Zhang, 1989). In a university in China, administrators and faculties respect most those leaders who are distinguished professors, scholars and experts with high academic accomplishments (Li, 1989).

#### Personal Qualities

What should a university president rely on to influence others' perceptions and behaviors? Is it "power", "position", or "personal quality"? People in an Eastern society like China show respect to, and are easily influenced by, those who have the power and are at high positions. However, in a changing society that has a more progressive civilization, and people's expectations are higher also, the traditional style of influencing others by power and position appear outmoded. New requirements of strong and effective leaders include "professional knowledge", "outstanding competency", as mentioned before, and "personal characteristics", that is, personal qualities.

Faculties believe that the most important are the leaders' personal qualities, including self-awareness of his own personality, strengths and weaknesses, modesty, tolerance, uprightness, selflessness, and trustworthiness, otherwise he can not establish his authority among the faculties and administrators. When working with other administrators, the president needs to have self-control, self-adjustment, and adaptability (Ding & Yuan, 1989), flexibility, knowing Eastern leadership theories expressed in Taoist and Confucianist philosophies (Yuan, 1989). For instance, the leader has to be good at role modelling which is one of the Eastern values. Exemplary leadership has a strong effect on influencing others (Yuan & Lu, 1989; and Li, 1992). "Honesty" and "harmony" are the two values in human relationships; and "unity" and "conformity" are another pair of key values in leader-follower relationships, according to Li Mian, former president and Party secretary of Shaanxi Teachers' University.

Case 1. Wu Qi Di, president of Tongji University (TU) Being an enthusiastic, committed and persistent scholar and administrator, Wu Qi Di is the first elected, female president of the 89-year old TU. She is well respected, admired and trusted by the faculties. She is a distinguished professor with outstanding accomplishments in her profession, and an entrepreneurial leader with administrative experiences and strong personal characteristics. She is skilful at building and maintaining good relationship with people inside and outside of TU (Fang, 1995).

The president is expected to be decisive and to have the power of resolution. Being indecisive and irresolute is considered a weak leader. According to Yu and Liang (1989), the leader needs to obtain necessary information, and rely on certain feedback system. The leader needs to have analytical skills, well-informed judgment, and the courage to take risk as well as to take responsibility if a wrong decision has been made. Li (1992) points out that while a leader's decisiveness in decision making is important, consultation is also necessary for avoiding subjectivism.

Preparing the labour force with specialties, as one of the major characters of higher education management, is a long-term endeavour. It takes 4 to 5 years to bring up an undergraduate, and then 3 to 5 years at work before university graduates are able to exert their specialties, so decision making at the top administrative level and mission statement should be forward-

looking (Sun, 1992).

The president has to be innovative and unconventional. Li (1989) stresses that those who are conventional and ritual-oriented can never make any progress and achievements. Normally there are three work attitudes among university administrators: 1) taking initiative, active, and creative, guided by policies; 2) waiting for others to do first, passive; and 3) taking initiative but reckless, not following the guidelines of policies. The first attitude is recommended because although university leaders have the authority to make changes in their programmes and administrative structure; in setting criteria for recruitment of the faculty and for enrolling students; and even in managing the budget, to realize the leader's vision of the university, they have to do all these in line with national goals through guidelines set in policies. For instance, when restructuring the programmes to introduce information technology to enhance the teaching and learning; and when establishing exchange programmes with institutions abroad, the president takes initiative in an unconventional way and in line with the educational policy with long-term goals towards modernization, opening to the world, and facing the future.

Case 2. Wu Shu Qing, president of Beijing University (BU)  
Wu Shu Qing, president of BU, described how he came to the vision of BU: He analyzed the trends of higher education development in and outside China, carefully studied the models and characteristics of the best universities in the world, examined the advantages and disadvantages of BU, and took into consideration of the targets of the national economic and social development, then set the goals for BU - during the early years in the next century, BU will be developed into one of the first-class universities in the

world and built as an advanced education and research centre to exert its three major functions, i.e., talents training, scientific research, and social services (Wu, 1996) A reading of mission and vision statements expressed by first-rate universities in China, like BU, shows that it has reached a consensus among the presidents of most of these universities to aim at building theirs into first-rate universities in the world in the 21st century. Another example is Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJU) whose president, Jiang De Ming, also sets the university goal of establishing it as a first-class international institution of higher learning (Jiang, 1996). At present, there are 14 schools and institutes with 43 departments offering 53 programmes in this 100-year old university..

#### Grooming talented people

Identifying and grooming talented people is a virtue in leadership. Shen (1989) points out that one of the indicators of leaders' professional maturity is that he is good at identifying people with potential, utilize their talents and unite them, and consolidate those whose perspectives are different from theirs.

The leader is supposed to be good at selecting and promoting talented people (Liu, 1989). He is expected to be sharp at noticing and identifying the right persons, and to have the courage to appoint them to positions. Also he is to protect and groom those administrators and faculty members with potential. Once appointing these people, he must trust and support them. University leaders need to overcome the pitfall of jealousy as it causes mistrust. It is hard for a leader to promote someone who is more competent than the leader himself, and even harder to promote someone to replace his own position. Those leaders who envy their subordinates with potential are looked down upon by the faculty.

#### Commitment and dedication

Respectable presidents are those who are committed to and persistent in the mission of the university. The following 5 functions embody the president's "commitment and dedication": 1. designer--designing the blueprint of the university and operational plans; 2. commander-- deciding and organizing at the top level; 3. mentor--grooming potential leaders; 4. coordinator--building positive human relations between administration and faculty; and 5. civil servant--helping the staff who have problems, and the assistance can range from consultation to logistics (Yuan & Lin, 1989).



Speaking of the above apprehensions, Zhao and Li (1989) suggest that 1) the government has less interference, for the university to have authentic autonomy in their curricular designing and budgetary management, so that the president is helped to overcome the predicament in which the president has responsibilities with no power; 2) setting up an administrative committee for the president to do consultation with, in order to avoid autocracy; 3) establishing an inspecting system to encourage faculty's participation and to prevent any major mistakes made by the president; and 4) unifying "responsibility, power, and benefit" of the presidency, in order to make up their losses in academic undertakings.

#### V. Conclusion

Higher education development in China in the 1990s is under the guidance of the policy stipulated by the State Education Commission (SEC). The emphasis of the policy since late 1980s was shifted from expansion to 1) improving educational quality, 2) readjusting its structure, and 3) raising efficiency and facilities, as mentioned in the Introduction section. In response to this shift, administrative systems in universities were under drastic reforms that have resulted in such new characteristics as "competition, openness, efficacy, autonomy, and comprehension in programs". The most important change in the administrative systems is the changing role of the president from a supporting figure to a leading figure.

Because of this changing role of the presidency, administrators and faculties have higher expectations in their leaders. In this paper the president's leadership qualities have been identified as follows:

1. Basic qualities-- sense of responsibility, educational and professional knowledge, and managerial competencies.
2. Personal qualities-- self-awareness, modesty, tolerance, uprightness, selflessness, and trustworthiness, self-control, self-adjustment, adaptability, power of resolution, commitment and dedication.
3. Professional qualities-- knowing the science of education, the science of leadership, and Eastern leadership theories expressed in Taoist and Confucianist philosophies.

It is commonly agreed that the first consideration of presidency is that the president is a renowned scholar and a professional in certain academic field, possessing leadership capacity, and that whether the leader is accommodating, tolerant, modest, or human-relationship oriented should be the second consideration. Zhu Kai Xuan, Director of State Education Commission, when addressing requirements of university leaders, points out that "they must have academic qualifications, integrity, and pioneering" (1996).

In summary, presidency has become a very challenging position. The president is not only a political figure supported by the government and the Party secretary in the university, but also an educational/academic leader supported by the faculty. More importantly, the president needs to have high academic accomplishments so that he is qualified to assume academic leadership. According to Weng Shi Lie (1996), president of Shanghai Jiaotong University (SJTU), it has become indispensable to have more components of academic leadership in decision making, consultation, and commanding systems in university

administration. This is apparently a challenge for university presidents, and they need to continuously make their best endeavour in self-cultivation to raise their leadership qualities.

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