Principalship in China: Emerging propositions

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ABSTRACT: Since the release of the 2009 and 2012 PISA results, Shanghai has been considered a world giant in education (Tucker, 2011), with countries all over the world engaged in enthusiastic exploration of what they can learn from this ‘strong performer and successful reformer’ (OECD, 2011). Despite this widespread international interest, however, little is known about the educational changes taking place in mainland China. For example, a search for international journal articles and book chapters specifically on school principalship in China, the focus of the study reported herein, yields just 57 citations over the 16-year span from 1998 to 2013 (e.g. Walker & Qian, in press). Given the paucity of research in this area, the aim of this study was to provide a greater understanding of this important yet underdeveloped topic.

Introduction

Research over the past four decades has demonstrated conclusively that school principalship makes a difference, with building-level leaders increasingly recognised as pivotal contributors to the success of both schools and students (Daly, 2009; Roach, Smith & Boutin, 2011). Despite the expansion of our knowledge base in this arena in recent years, some facets of school principalship deserve deeper exploration. One such facet is the way in which personal, organisational, political, economic, geographic, societal and cultural factors may influence school principalship (Walker, Hu & Qian, 2012).

Amongst these factors, the influence of societal and cultural factors is probably the least investigated, possibly because the field of school principalship, as well as that of education in general, is dominated by the one-way flow of best practices and theoretical models from the West to the rest of the world (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger, Walker & Bajunid, 2005; Walker, 2004, 2007). In other words, principals in China probably pay lip service to the same concepts – concepts such as transformational leadership and curriculum leadership – as their Western counterparts. However, the use of these concepts in the Chinese context and the way in which individual Chinese principals interpret them are inadequately understood. Another explanation for the lack of attention towards the possibly subtle societal and cultural influences on school principalship is the difficulty of capturing them. Potential societal influences include the
historically accepted patterns of behaviour, hierarchies of power and norms of interaction that shape principals’ work (Smulyan, 2000). These influences often lurk unseen at different organisational levels, and unravelling them is by no means an easy job (Cowen, 2000).

Therefore, although there is evidence to show that societal values and other contextual variables influence the way in which principals perceive and enact their roles, our knowledge in this area remains inadequate, and that which exists is produced, stored and disseminated according to rules established in a fairly limited collection of societies. What is particularly lacking is research that produces authentic insights; unveils the deep structures underpinning principals’ roles and the personal or interpersonal dimensions of their jobs; and locates scholarly understanding within the broad socio-political and historical context in which schools operate and principals manage and lead.

Such contextualised research on school principalship is particularly necessary and timely in China. Education, which can be seen as a microcosm of Chinese society, is undergoing massive change in this important emerging economy. The call for quality education (suzhi jiaoyu) issued in 1999 (State Council, 1999) dramatically shifted the state-sanctioned goal of education from preparing students for higher-level education to ensuring their holistic development; the mission of teachers from socialising youth into the major traditions and values of China to preparing them for an uncertain global labour market; and the role of principals from ensuring the academic success of their school to providing students with a unique learning experience. Such key terms as accountability, performance-based evaluation and school-based curriculum now dominate policy documents in the educational realm, although the older rhetoric of examinations, hierarchy and informal power still exerts an influence. China is at the intersection of old and new and of imported and traditional ideas. Furthermore, within the context of their individual schools, Chinese principals are plagued by internal struggles and anxieties. The complexity of the situation cries out for more in-depth knowledge.

This article reports the results of an empirical study investigating the meanings that Chinese principals attach to their role. Examination of the role of the principal in mainland China makes three contributions to the literature. First, the study fills the knowledge gap concerning school principalship in China by providing in-depth descriptions of how principals, in the face of the challenges of reform, create and sustain (or fail to create and sustain) the in-school factors that foster school-level change. Such in-depth and contextualised accounts of Chinese principals are largely absent from the contemporary leadership discourse.

Second, the study contributes to construction of a ‘middle-level theory’ of Chinese leadership (Fullan, 1996). It yields a set of propositions about principalship in China, thus ‘enrich[ing] theory and practice in education . . . [which] have existed largely hidden in the shadows of the dominant Western paradigm[s] that have guided the field’ (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996, p. 100).

Finally, the third contribution is the likelihood of cooling the international fever to learn from China. A number of recent studies (e.g. OECD, 2011; Tan, 2013; Tucker, 2011) have set out to identify practices that are commonly adopted in China but rarely observed elsewhere with the aim of possibly copying them in the researchers’ home countries. This article provides evidence-based examples of the dilemmas faced and tensions experienced by Chinese principals. It will thus help the international community to consider the extent to which Chinese educational models can be followed in more informed fashion. In this sense, it serves as a starting point for international dialogue (Militello & Berger, 2010).
The following section presents details of the study design and the major steps of data analysis. The Findings section then discusses the most common interpretations of China’s educational reforms amongst school principals and their shared knowledge of what it is to be a principal in China. The concluding section succinctly summarises the major features of the school principalship role in China.

The Study

There have been few in-depth investigations of the role of Chinese principals. Investigations of that role using qualitative research methods (Oplatka, 2010; Paton, 2002), in particular, are urgently needed given the complexity of the context within which principals enact their roles.

Context

*Suzhi jiaoyu* has been the well-recognised guiding principle of education policy in China for the past 15 years (Li, 2004). This imprecise term, which is frequently translated as ‘quality education’, encompasses a range of educational ideals, but generally refers to a holistic style of education that centres on the whole person (Carney, 2008). In Chinese discourse, *suzhi jiaoyu* is seen as more of a reaction to the excesses of *yingshi jiaoyu* (examination-oriented education) than as a clear and definable concept (Dello Iacovo, 2009). A document issued in 1999 – *Decisions on Deepening Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education in an All-round Way* (CCP, 1999) – marked the beginning of the full-scale promotion of quality education in China.

Three major reform initiatives launched since 1999 shape the work environment of Chinese principals today.

- **School review reform.** The major thrust of this reform initiative was to use the ‘exemplary school’ (or demonstration school) model to replace the former ‘key school’ model. Its aim was to overcome the problems caused by the over-concentration of quality resources in a few key schools. The central leadership (State Council, 2001) proposed a new school review system, the general principle of which was that all types of schools, whether previously dubbed key or ordinary schools, could apply for exemplary school status as long as they could demonstrate some notable achievement in the promotion of quality education. The attainment of such a designation would require schools to go through a formal review process.

- **Curriculum reform.** Curriculum reform was triggered by calls to reduce students’ workload, but its ultimate aim was to cultivate student creativity and initiative by challenging the existing exam-driven curriculum. The *Framework for the Curriculum Reform of Basic Education – The Trial Version*, a milestone document issued in 2001, called for a shift from pure knowledge transmission towards the fostering of learning attitudes and values; from repetitive and mechanistic rote learning towards increased student participation; from emphasis on the purely screening and selective functions of assessments towards recognition of their formative and constructive functions; and from a centralised curriculum towards a curriculum that catered for local needs. This reform required schools to design school-based courses.
• **Personnel reform.** The main aim of the school personnel reform was to promote principal and teacher professionalism. China’s system of hierarchical bureaucracy meant that school principals had a nominal official rank (Feng, 2003). As a result, many perceived themselves as more of a state cadre (guojia ganbu) than an education professional (Wang, 2004). A new professional ranking system was recommended for principals. For example, a number of cities, including Shanghai, adopted a principal career-ladder system (zhiji zhi) under the terms of which promotion to a higher rank required principals to take part in a review process that explicitly linked their ranking to school performance. The revised system’s aim was to render principals professionally accountable to such internal stakeholders as teachers and students (Feng, 2003; Wang, 2004).

The stronger emphasis on performance management and accountability effected by the education reform has seen more administrative and personnel power devolved to school principals. In an increasingly competitive educational environment, they are expected to lead the changes taking place at the school level and cater to the central government’s demands for performance and accountability. Consequently, the role of the principal has become an important key to the success and meaningfulness (or otherwise) of China’s education reforms.

**Participant selection**

The study adopted a purposive sampling strategy to select the research participants from amongst secondary school principals. Secondary school principals were chosen as the research population primarily because all final-year secondary school students have to take the College Entrance Examination, or High Exam (gaokao), the results of which are of extreme importance to students, parents and the reputation of the school. The High Exam is also the point at which the many debates surrounding the school curriculum and review policies converge. The pressure associated with the High Exam presents secondary school principals with a number of dilemmas in their work lives that cause those lives to be fraught with tension.

Shanghai was selected as the research site in full awareness of the vast geographical and economic disparities in China. Although its relatively high level of economic development, numerous international exchanges and relatively high standard of living mean that Shanghai is not representative of China as a whole, the city has long been an educational experimental zone. Many policies have undergone trial runs in Shanghai before being adopted nationwide. For example, the city has been afforded the privilege of experimenting with curriculum reforms before their extension to other parts of the nation (Cheng, 2011). The phase-2 curriculum reform in Shanghai, which became the model for national curriculum change (Cheng, 2011), was launched in 1998. Shanghai was also one of the first cities to adopt a principal career-ladder system (zhiji zhi). Shanghai principals are divided into five classes: special, first, second, third and fourth class, and the city has also adopted the exemplary school system at the senior secondary level. There are three types of schools under the new review system: municipal exemplary schools, district exemplary schools and ordinary schools.

To ensure cross-participant variation, such broad criteria as school type (municipal exemplary, district exemplary and ordinary) and years of principalship (extensive versus little experience) were used in the selection process. This sampling strategy was designed to provide a more comprehensive picture of school principalship in Shanghai. Eleven principals with an
acceptable degree of variation in terms of demographic, professional and school background participated in the study. Table 1 provides basic information on the 11 participating principals.

**TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Years as Principal</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>About 17 years</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>Ordinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiu</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>About 17 years</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>Ordinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>About 15 years</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>Municipal exemplary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>About 12 years</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
<td>New municipal exemplary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>About 7 years</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Municipal exemplary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>About 6 years</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>Municipal exemplary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>About 3 years</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>New district exemplary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhong</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>Ordinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>55-60</td>
<td>District exemplary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jia</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>About 8 years</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>Transformed from ordinary to minban (Usually means privately-run, or non-government, school).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yun</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>About 4 years</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Municipal exemplary and a minban middle school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedure**

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the participating principals, complemented by a review of such documents as their online CVs and publications in professional journals such as *Shanghai Education* and media reports on the participating schools or school principals.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the principals’ offices. They were asked three broad groups of questions. The first group concerned their biographical details and work experience. These questions were designed to elicit critical incidents in the participants’ lives and to establish rapport. The second group of questions centred on the three aforementioned reform policies, specifically on how the principals had interpreted and implemented those policies. Finally, the third group of questions focused on role reflection, with the participating principals asked to evaluate their relationships with other significant parties, including local government officials, parents and teachers, and to reflect on specific high, low and turning points in their working lives and on their personal hopes and expectations.

Data analysis comprised three major stages, the first of which was analysis of each individual principal by applying the three reform policies as critical events. This stage of analysis teased out the significant parties that the principals took into consideration when they interpreted and
implemented these policies; their perceptions of the expectations of each of these parties; the way in which they managed/solved/addressed related problems or issues while negotiating these expectations in implementing reform; and the principals’ explanations of and justifications for their decisions and practices.

The second stage of analysis involved identifying the patterns and more generic issues related to the role of the principal that emerged from the individual cases and comparing convergent and divergent patterns. The third and final stage of analysis was determination of final categories to assist organisation of the findings. The development of explanatory categories was informed by Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) *roles* thesis, according to which all human activity is subject to habitualisation and any frequently repeated actions become cast into patterns. Habitualised actions then retain their meaningful character for the individual, as the meanings involved become embedded as routines in their general stock of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). For the individual, this knowledge is taken for granted and serves to guide his or her thinking and actions.

Consequently, by playing the role of principal, an individual is ‘inducted into specific areas of socially objectivated knowledge’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 76), which is shared with and available to all principals. Only in this way can the individual principal have some assurance that he or she is playing a routine social role in the eyes of significant stakeholders. Principals’ shared body of knowledge can be likened to the *unwritten libretto* of a drama. This unwritten libretto is the stock of internalised knowledge that principals share and the set of rules and role standards that they abide by and take for granted. The common themes that arose in the cross-case analysis stage were thus assembled into the unwritten libretto category. However, an unwritten libretto does not make a drama performance. Realisation of the drama depends on the reiterated performance of its prescribed roles by living actors who embody those roles and actualise them on stage. Each individual actor may present a different outward role performance despite sharing an internalised unwritten libretto with other actors. The different themes that arose in cross-case analysis were thus assembled in the *performance* category. Finally, a performance is mediated primarily by the stage, and data related to participants’ biographies and school context were thus assembled in the *stage* category. The stage, unwritten libretto and performance categories constituted the three major categories into which the findings were organised.

Given the limited space, this article concentrates on the findings in the *unwritten libretto* category, that is, on the common knowledge shared by school principals in China. It is believed that this common knowledge will help us to better understand the principalship role from a holistic perspective.

**Findings**

Many commonalities were found in how the participating principals described the possibilities and constraints that accompanied the country’s educational reforms. These commonalities suggest that there is a set of tacit knowledge shared by all Chinese principals. In other words, there are ‘rules of the game’ that individuals must master to become school principals. It is this tacit knowledge, or rules of the game, that constitutes the unwritten libretto of school principalship in China.
This section first presents several common interpretations of the possibilities and constraints accompanying the reforms, and then discusses the major content of the unwritten libretto.

Common interpretation of three reform policies

Reform of school review system

In the decade since the exemplary school policy was instituted, 50 schools in Shanghai have been awarded a municipal exemplary designation. However, little real change has been made to the old key/ordinary school distinction. One participating principal, Principal Luo, commented: ‘If you read the list of the 50 schools, you may well find that all of the previous municipal key schools have become exemplary schools. No one has been excluded’. The only difference is that some schools previously designated district key schools have managed to be included in the list.

Thus, according to the data collected, the new exemplary school review policy did little to alter the key/ordinary school distinction. Principal Yun used the metaphor of changing hats to describe the shift from the key school to exemplary school system, expressing his belief that it involved little more than a redistribution of resources:

It is just a change of school titles. It is like a person who used to wear a black hat and now wears a red hat. The only change it [the new system] has brought is that some less recognised schools have also now got the title of municipal exemplary school. It is in a sense just a redistribution of resources.

Because exemplary schools have better teachers and students, the degree to which schools newly designated as such should serve as examples to ordinary schools is also open to question. Thus, the principals of lower-status schools interviewed for this study recognised that the reform policy will not help them to compete with higher-level schools on an equal basis, as originally intended. In sum, the policy appears to have done little to alter the hierarchical differences amongst schools.

Reform of curriculum system

The interviewees were not overly optimistic about the changes that had accompanied the curriculum reform. The new and supposedly reformed curriculum comprises three categories of courses: basic, extended and research courses. In the new system, principals are given the power to develop and design extended and research courses, but there has been no change in the degree of importance placed on learning the basics, that is, such subjects as Chinese, Mathematics and English, which are included in the centralised examinations. The principals suggested that the main reason for the emphasis on basic courses to remain unchanged is that the student examination system has remained unchanged. The High Exam remains of the utmost importance. The principals were very clear about this, with Principal Lin’s words representative of their feelings:

The only criterion that society values in a high school is how many students can go on to college. The school superintendents also view schools in this way. Thus, it is meaningless talking about [promoting students’ all-round development] and cultivating more Lu Bans [a famous craftsman in ancient China] amongst students. One hundred Lu Bans cannot compare with a zhuangyuan [person who achieves the highest score] in the High Exam.
Hence, although the aim of the curriculum reform was to change the teaching and learning process by adding extended and research courses, it did not touch upon the outcome of that process, that is, the exam system. Recognising that the criteria by which schools are judged remains unchanged, none of the principals interviewed for this study felt that he or she could risk changing traditional teaching and learning practices, particularly if they produced good exam results.

Reform of school personnel system
One aim of the career-ladder system is to encourage the transfer of principals from higher-status to lower-status schools. However, whether that aim has been achieved in practice remains open to question. The principals of higher-status schools still seem to enjoy a higher professional ranking, and the interviewees thus believed that promotion to such a school would help them to gain greater professional recognition, as Principal Jia’s statement makes clear:

If your school is a low-status school, it is more difficult for you to achieve [recognition as] a famous principal or special-class principal. You have to work as a principal for 13-15 years and demonstrate good performance. Thus, the special-class principals in Shanghai are mainly from famous schools. . . . Many principals expect that they will be promoted to a better school if they demonstrate their performance to the local government.

Therefore, the predominant motivator for principals appears to be the possibility of promotion to a better, i.e. higher-level, school. The career-ladder system in itself appears to do little to motivate them.

Beyond that system, the personnel reform was also designed to grant principals greater autonomy in recruiting, promoting and evaluating teachers. However, in reality his or her power is circumscribed by a number of rules. For example, the local education bureau prescribes how many new teachers a school can recruit, and each state-recruited teacher is given a public bianzhi (loosely translated as ‘establishment post’). Thus, a school must have a vacant bianzhi quota granted to them before they can hire new teaching staff. A common understanding amongst the participating principals was that material rewards constitute the most effective way of motivating teachers. Therefore, a major challenge that principals face is finding a way to maximise school funding and then spending that funding where it is needed most. Many schools have adopted student exam performance as a major criterion for evaluating and motivating teachers.

Table 2 summarises the main commonalities in the principals’ opinions about the three education reforms. It illustrates their most pressing concerns in relation to these reforms and notes the most significant parties connecting the reforms and their concerns.

At least three interrelated issues deserve further attention. First, the government remains the key significant party in principals’ interpretations of all three reform initiatives. Thus, relationship-building with officials in various levels of government is a top priority. Second, although principals have limited power over personnel issues, they are expected to maintain school stability and encourage teachers to ensure outstanding student performance. Third, the interview data indicate that principals are concerned about obtaining resources, both economic resources such as government funding and human resources such as teachers. These issues are discussed in greater depth in the following section.
### TABLE 2: PRINCIPALS’ COMMON CONCERNS ABOUT REFORMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reform Initiative</th>
<th>Significant Party Involved</th>
<th>Important Concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School review reform</td>
<td>Government agencies</td>
<td>• Remains a government-dominated reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Little change to key/ordinary school distinction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum reform</td>
<td>Government agencies</td>
<td>• Contradictory government expectations: need to both implement curriculum reform and pursue good student performance on High Exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Priority accorded to High Exam because of the resources that good performance can bring and, conversely, the reputational threats that underperformance poses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel reform</td>
<td>Government agencies and Teachers</td>
<td>• Professional ranking seen as related to school status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Strong motivation from opportunity for promotion to higher-status school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The power to recruit, promote and dismiss teachers circumscribed by higher-level government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Performance-based teacher evaluation model adopted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Being a principal in China: Important knowledge

The study’s findings reveal common agreement that being a principal in China involves establishing and maintaining *guanxi* (relationships) with the government, the need to maintain internal harmony and the need to obtain resources.

*Maintaining guanxi with the government*

Maintaining *guanxi* with the government was remarkably important to the principals interviewed for this study. They were highly conscious of their role as state employees and their accountability to and dependence on various government agencies. The principals were also aware that their autonomy is circumscribed by the local government and that they are held accountable across a broad range of areas. Principal Lin adopted the somewhat sexist metaphor of mothers-in-law to describe the various government departments concerned. In his view, because numerous ‘mothers-in-law’ interfere in school affairs, principals are burdened with additional responsibilities that distract them from focusing energy on teaching and learning:

> For example, if a woman teacher gets pregnant and wants to have a second child, it is the responsibility of the principal [to persuade her not to deliver the baby]. Otherwise, the school cannot get a designation as a *Model Unit*. Is this a principal’s responsibility?
Given the influence of these ‘mothers-in-law’, attending the meetings organised by various government departments has become an important component of a principal’s job. Principal Jin claimed that he has to devote at least one and a half days a week to attending meetings, and Luo that few principals can continue to teach because of these interruptions. Furthermore, government intervention in school admission, curriculum and personnel issues means that principals have little room to innovate. Principal Lin commented:

There are a lot of pre-conditions for making a school better. One important condition is the autonomy of the principal. However, what autonomy do we have? Everything is tightly regulated. If you do something your superiors do not endorse, you risk losing your principal position. However, if you do everything as required, how can there be any school improvement?

Lin’s words reinforce the reality that principals depend on the government for job security and promotion. Chinese schools have long relied on the government for funding, students and teachers, and the situation is largely unchanged today. This lack of autonomy and concomitant dependence on the government relegates principals to a subordinate role to government officials rather than allowing them to be – and be seen as – independent professionals. The participating principals also expressed the belief that few government officials regard principalship as a profession. At the same time, however, they seemed to know how to relate to these officials. Although they recognised that they are burdened with many unreasonable responsibilities, they indicated that they tend to willingly shoulder these burdens because of their subordinate position and awareness of their location in various hierarchies. One principal said: ‘You have to properly handle the relationship with your superiors. Not making conflicts is essential. You have to keep the feeling to yourself even if you feel wronged’.

To establish good relationships, the principals had learnt not to openly confront or contradict their superiors. Although they did not feel the need to adhere strictly to all of their superiors’ orders, the rule was that you must not question their authority. Principal Xiu described this as the ‘iron fist in a velvet glove’ strategy. In sum, the interview data show that good relationships with superiors can be used in exchange for position security and additional government support. Inside the school, good relationships with teachers were also deemed necessary if a principal wanted to win support from and the compliance of teachers and build a harmonious campus.

Importance of internal harmony
The interviewees all emphasised the importance of harmonious interpersonal relationships within the school. These principals believed that an ideal harmonious campus is one in which students and teachers are not loosely attached to one another but actually form an inseparable, interdependent collective. In other words, harmony is built upon commonality and, to a large extent, uniformity. Even though the principals involved in this study expected conformity from teachers, this was not simply a matter of the latter doing what they were told unquestioningly. Principal Jia instead stressed the importance of human relationships and harmony within the school:

[Harmonious interpersonal relationships] are very important. They are something with a strong Chinese characteristic. Our culture requires that we need to learn the art of dealing with people. . . . If your words cannot be endorsed by your teachers, your orders will not be implemented.
He also mentioned that a principal needs to make ‘legitimate, reasonable and sensible’ decisions to establish good relations with teachers and to get them to conform. It is also important that principals avoid conflicts with teachers, as open conflicts are perceived as a threat to harmony. To do so, a principal needs to know how to protect his or her teachers’ ‘face’ (mianzi) and how not to threaten their personal interests. For example, Principal Guo discussed one personnel reform that he had initiated at his school. To resolve the problem of a clumsy leadership structure, he decided to shift some mid-level leaders to teaching posts. In doing so, he recognised two issues as crucial: protecting the face of the teachers involved and ensuring that they suffered no economic losses. Accordingly, Guo gave them the title of ‘famous teacher’ before moving them into their new posts and granted them an additional bonus to keep them happy. To avoid conflicts, principals also need to know when and how to use material rewards to motivate teachers. Such knowledge is dependent on what several of the principals called ‘wisdom’. Guo’s words capture the essence of his fellow interviewees’ opinions in this arena:

Contemporary life has determined that more money motivates people. I have developed my own policy of when and how to distribute money to teachers. First, it has to depend on specific situations. Second, you have to find and maintain an appropriate tempo to give money. Third, you have to change your policy in accordance with circumstances. For example, the bonus distributed before Chinese New Year needs to be relatively equal amongst teachers, whereas if your purpose is to reward job performance, then you have to differentiate according to teachers’ workload and work performance. What we must bear in mind is that, first, you cannot overuse this material lever and, second, bonus distribution cannot threaten the harmony of the school. Thus, we need to seek an equilibrium.

It was widely recognised amongst the interviewees that to be able to provide material rewards a school first has to have adequate funds available. Obtaining financial resources was thus deemed important.

Awareness of the importance of obtaining resources
The principals were very aware of the importance of obtaining adequate resources. Their logic was simple: teachers are the school’s most important resource, and, to attract, keep and motivate teachers, a school needs money to properly reward them. Therefore, finding sources of funding is paramount. Principal Lin noted that, to attract good teachers, ‘you have to talk about economic rewards. You cannot expect everybody to work hard and not ask for any rewards like Lei Feng’. Lin was referring to a People’s Liberation Army member famous for his selfless service to the people. Principal Tan explained that teachers also take their own financial welfare into careful account when they evaluate a principal:

Teachers definitely [take the income they get at the school into consideration] when they evaluate a principal. For example, if I gave each teacher a 500-yuan bonus in celebration of, let’s say, International Labour Day last year, then they would expect me to give them more this year.

It seems that principals assume personal responsibility for taking care of teachers as soon as they become principals simply because that is what they are supposed to do. For example, Principal Xiu reflected that:

Because I have taken the position of principal... others count on me to give them money. Then, I have to get more money from different sources. So I have to please others and ask them to donate instead of assuming a superior role as an intellectual.
Although the government remains the most important source of funding for schools, principals know that they have to obtain additional resources from other sources. In addition to its regular recurrent funding (distributed on the basis of student numbers), the government has additional funds that it can allocate to schools based on need. Whether a school has access to those funds seems to be dependent primarily on principals’ ability to persuade the government and to form good relations with government officials. In Principal Xiu’s view, the key is to make your superiors believe that your school is worthy of extra investment.

In addition to these ‘spare’ government funds, principals can also actively tap a variety of other channels for additional funds. However, good relationships are not cost-free, but are accompanied by reciprocal expectations and norms. For example, the critical issue of school admission is intimately interwoven with a principal’s relational obligations and social exchange. Deciding which students to admit in the upcoming school year is a problem that many principals face every summer, particularly those who head up elite schools. Most of the principals interviewed for this study were rather evasive about how they deal with this issue, with many providing ambiguous answers. For example, Principal Jin claimed that he uses formal requirements as his first criterion, but also noted that he does not want to offend anyone. Principal Guo also admitted that admitting certain new students presents a good opportunity to establish and strengthen relationships with influential people who will bring the school ‘long-term benefits’.

In sum, there is a body of knowledge that all of the participating principals saw as important. That body of knowledge essentially constitutes knowledge that three factors are indispensable to a Chinese principal: guanxi, harmony and resources. Maintaining good relations (guanxi) with the government and other external stakeholders helps principals to acquire resources that they can use to maintain relationships with teachers and thus build a harmonious workplace. The research findings presented in this section create a holistic picture of school principalship in China.

**Discussion**

The five following propositions, which are based on the foregoing research findings, sum up the major features of the school principalship role in China.

- **Proposition 1**, Societal norms play an important part in shaping the role of principal in China. The influence of these norms can be observed in various aspects of principals’ work lives, particularly in their respect for positional power and their widespread exercise of informal power. As a result, principals’ decision-making autonomy is both limited and easily swayed by external influences. To a large extent, Chinese principals remain state agents who face considerable external pressure.

The data compiled for this study show that Chinese principals’ work environment is characterised by a variety of government demands that seem to formally and relationally regulate every aspect of their work lives. Principals are under pressure to meet these demands. Although they can negotiate certain issues in some cases, they must do so carefully to avoid challenging their superiors’ authority. The participating principals thus tended to see themselves as members of a hierarchical system in which respect for positional power is taken for granted. Their autonomous power is easily altered by hierarchical connections and pressure from influential others to accede to their wishes.
Proposition 2. Although Chinese principals perform a similar set of core leadership functions to their counterparts elsewhere, there are differences in the way they enact those functions. The reasons for the differences are intimately connected to a multitude of contextual factors. The importance of obtaining resources may form an additional core leadership function for Chinese principals.

When examined in relation to the four major leadership functions outlined by Leithwood et al. (2006) – setting a direction, managing instructional programs, developing people and redesigning the organisation – two issues mark Chinese principals as different from their counterparts elsewhere. First, in China, principals apparently perform these functions in the face of various constraints, most of which come from overt state intervention in principals’ daily duties. Chinese principals thus practise leadership in an environment marked by less autonomy and more state intervention. Second, the need to obtain resources, and the time devoted to doing so, not only constitutes a constraint, but also one of the core leadership functions of Chinese principals.

Proposition 3. Principals see teachers as an important resource that they both rely upon and exploit. Material incentives are frequently used to motivate and reward teachers. In return for providing job security and monetary incentives, principals expect loyalty, a harmonious campus and good teacher performance.

Teachers are increasingly seen as an important resource that is needed to produce high levels of student achievement in exams, which in turn boost a school’s reputation. Principals consciously nurture relationships with teachers, primarily through the exchange of utilitarian favours. Because principals believe teachers to be driven by material rewards, they use monetary incentives to motivate teachers to display better performance, particularly performance that results in good student results on the High Exam. The principals interviewed for this study talked about encouraging greater teacher involvement in school decision making, but they also seemed to believe that such involvement was not an important concern for teachers. Teachers are more focused on actual benefits, they said, particularly benefits in the form of money. By obtaining more resources to supply teachers with additional monetary rewards, principals expect that teachers will work harmoniously with others and hard for the school.

Proposition 4. Hierarchies exist amongst principals. In other words, the role of the principal is status-based in China. Principals’ status is determined by their level of guanxi with political superiors and access to an expansive network, both of which in turn have an interactive relationship with the status of their schools and years of principalship.

A school’s status determines its attractiveness to parents, and hence the resources it attracts. School status is also marked by the degree of closeness between principals and higher-level government officials. The principals of higher-status schools tend to be more trusted by and enjoy a closer relationship with their superiors. Thus, a major source of motivation for lower-status principals is the possibility of being promoted to a higher-status school through the demonstration of good performance and cultivation of guanxi with superiors.

Proposition 5. ‘Successful’ principals in the Chinese context have a rich store of knowledge of how the system works. A key part of that knowledge store is knowledge of how to cultivate guanxi with influential people who can, in turn, help to strengthen principals’ position and possibly secure their promotion. Although principals are publicly
encouraged to be innovative, successful principals tend to be those who know full well that they cannot initiate any fundamental changes without the permission and support of their political superiors.

To achieve ‘success’ in the Chinese principalship context requires, first and foremost, the recognition and favour of the system and political superiors. Successful principals are those who can adeptly manipulate their rich knowledge of guanxi-maintenance and resource-attainment strategies. Positive guanxi with influential people is often accompanied by such tangible benefits as greater access to funding and career advancement. It can also serve to afford principals greater legitimacy because attachment to influential people is a form of social and cultural capital, at least in the eyes of others. Furthermore, because of their rich knowledge of the system, successful principals are acute policy readers. They make incremental changes in negotiable areas, but are careful not to challenge the system. Such principals are often held up as role models because of their loyalty, good guanxi with superiors and the change agent role they assume.

In sum, the work lives of Chinese school principals are replete with tension and ambiguity. On the surface, the issues they face are almost identical to those faced by their counterparts in other nations (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005). However, a closer look suggests that the shape and substance of those issues differ. Chinese principals place priority on the fulfilment of upward accountability. They have to enact their roles under heavy external pressure and carefully tend their relationships with various stakeholders. Cultivating guanxi and obtaining resources constitute the most important components of their work lives.

Note

References


