

# AN EXAMINATION OF TWO STUDIES ON CHINESE PRINCIPALSHIP: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

DEHUA LIU

*Hunan Normal University*

TAK CHEUNG CHAN

*Kennesaw State University*

## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to critically review two studies conducted ten years apart to examine the roles and responsibilities of school principals in China. Data of one study were collected from seven provinces of south China while those of the other study were mainly from Changsha area, Hunan Province. Though the same survey instrument was used in both studies for data collection, because of time and location differences, direct comparison of findings tend to be inappropriate. Longitudinal approach of school leadership studies in the future is recommended. Results of this review showed that principals in these two studies had unbalanced workload in distributing their effort in dealing with daily school businesses. The research approaches and findings of these two studies have significant implications for planning of educational leadership programs, planning of daily school practices and planning for future research in school leadership.*

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional roles and responsibilities of principals in modern Chinese schools have been explicitly spelt out in Chinese education literature for years. Representative work of Jiang (1986) and Jiang and Chan (1990) specifically laid out the scope of principals' daily work to include school organization, school law, educational planning, personnel management, school financial operation, curriculum development, instructional supervision, educational evaluation, resource management and school-community relations. School principals are expected of possessing the knowledge and skills needed to work in all aspects of work that confront them every day.

However, educational development in China has undergone tremendous changes in recent years along with its national open policies in international connections. The announcement of the Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Ministry of Education, 2001) is to aim at a student-centered policy with innovative educational approaches to include creativity, collaboration, engagement, problem-solving skills and knowledge applications. In addition to following the curriculum guidelines of the Central Government, school leaders are allowed to generate supplementary programs to suit the needs of their students.

All these changes have been taking place and were described by Li Lanqing (2005), China's former Vice Premier in charge of Education as follows:

In raising educational quality, you must set your eyes on all the students, and do all you can to promote their all-round development, raise teaching standards, improve classroom buildings and the learning environment, buy more equipment and facilities, improve teaching methods and approaches, strengthen school leadership and tighten school supervision, and improve the social environment.  
(p. 398)

The delivery of the Basic Education Curriculum Reform was not at all smooth in the years following its announcement. A more stringent system of educational supervision and accountability was needed to ensure efficient and effective implementation of the educational reform. School principals had no preparation as curriculum leaders (Su, Adams & Mininberg

(2000) and were accused for poor curriculum leadership in curriculum implementation (Luo & Xue, 2010). As a result, the Professional Standards of Principals at the Compulsory Education Stage was released in 2013 (Ministry of Education, 2013). These standards specifically lay out the roles and responsibilities of school principals in the effective delivery of school curriculum. Principals as instructional leaders have added responsibilities of curriculum supervision and evaluation in addition to other miscellaneous work for school operation. The purpose of this paper is to review the findings of two studies of the roles and responsibilities of Chinese school principals in a time frame of ten years.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON CHINESE PRINCIPALSHIP**

### **Types of School Leadership**

Wang and Ren (2012) identified three types of principal leadership: the ‘performance-orientated’ principals, ‘performance and research orientated’ principals and the ‘expert-type’ principals. The ‘performance-orientated’ principals set their goals to improve student performance with established criteria to measure the extent of success. The ‘performance and research orientated’ principals also set student achievement goals but on top of that they also want to understand why and how such goals can be attained. The ‘expert-type’ principals adopt their school leadership styles based on theoretical models. They are interested in exploring how theoretical models are applied to daily school practices. All three types of principals work hard to create positive learning environments for student success.

### **Leadership Style**

Chinese principals traditionally have been labeled as authoritative figures having supreme control of school administrative affairs (Lo, 2004). The Professional Standards of Principals (Ministry of Education, 2013) further add to the principals’ responsibilities as well as authorities. Kao’s study (2005) agreed that school administrators in China were simply acting on behalf of the Central Government policies with little individual characteristics. However, Zhang’s study (1998) concluded that Chinese school principals wanted to employ a leadership style more toward democracy. Yet, they still would like to maintain a substantial authority over certain areas of school administration.

In China, school principals are held to a high level of moral leadership (Li, 2011; Liu, 2008). Tao (2011) has developed areas to uphold principals’ moral standard to include setting up moral values, role modelling, and promoting moral values in school. The moral aspects of Professional Standards of Principals (Ministry of Education, 2013) have set stringent limitations on the expectations of personal and professional behaviors of school leaders.

In studying school principalship in China, Zhang (2010) collected her data through personal interviews and observations. She believed that school principals needed to exercise a shared leadership to be successful. Shared leadership is meant to build personal relationship with teachers and staffs in school. School principals need to learn to support teachers and staffs to share their responsibilities. Principals earn the respect of colleagues around them through personal integrity and influence.

### **Instructional Leadership**

The study of Luo and Xue (2010) indicated the need for principal preparation in the area of curriculum leadership in school. In response to that, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (2010) initiated the Three-Year Action Plan to Promote Curriculum Leadership of Secondary and

Primary School (and Kindergarten) Principals to upgrade principals' capability in curriculum leadership.

Curriculum leadership of principals was the backbone to successful curriculum implementation (Shi, 2008). Principals needed to learn to implement and evaluate curriculum and facilitate its supporting resources (Xia, 2012; Zhou & Xia, 2009). Zheng (2012) also uttered that principals needed to be capable of setting instructional goals, developing instructional activities, seeking for resources and establishing procedures of instruction evaluation. Chu and Liu (2010) further recommended that principals should connect frequently with teachers and observe classes on a regular basis. In Wang's study (2009), participating principals expressed that they could not be curriculum leaders if the school culture was heavily focused on examination outcomes.

In an attempt to develop a Chinese instructional leadership model, Zhao and Liu (2010) employed a combined interview and survey method. Their initiated model shows that instructional leadership in Chinese schools consisted of four dimensions – leading instructional organizations, designing instructional activities, creating instructional conditions and supervising teaching.

### **Leadership Strategies**

In their study of school principalship, Li, Li and Lu (2012) found some common strategies employed by principals in exercising leadership in their schools. These include inviting guest specialists to conduct workshops for teachers, supporting teachers by offering assistance after class observation, encouraging teachers to conduct action research in their classes to verify teaching and learning outcomes. However, principals in the study by Jiang, Chen and Lu (2010) were humble enough to identify factors that contribute mainly to school success: professional capacity of teachers, policy and resource support from local education entities, and the qualifications of the students enrolled in school. It is clear, anyway, that these contributing factors would not happen without strong leadership support from the principals.

### **Teacher Perception of Leadership**

Ma, Wang and Xie (2008) studied the views of teachers and principals on school leadership in rural China. They found that teachers did not see things the same way as principals in many ways. In school operations, financial resources were not rated by teachers as a significant issue as the principals did. Many teachers complained that principals did not pay enough attention to school curriculum implementation and classroom learning activities. In Pang's study (2001) that surveys teachers in China, it was found that teachers would like to see principals create more opportunities for communication, participation, collaboration, and consensus among their fellow teachers in school.

### **CHAN AND DU STUDY 2008**

Chan and Du (2008) studied the roles and responsibilities of school principals in China with both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Seventy-seven school principals from seven southern provinces in China---Guangdong, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shaanxi, Hubei, Henan, and Sichuan--- participated in the study. A thirty-item Likert-scale questionnaire was designed by the researchers to survey school principals in seven leadership areas: character, professional knowledge, professional skill, administrative style, administrative duties, personnel management, and student affairs management. The instrument was tested for validity in contents, language and format. The test and retest reliability coefficient was .885 and internal consistency of the instrument was tested by using Cronbach Alpha Test (Overall Alpha = .854). In addition, a questionnaire with three open-ended

questions was also constructed to solicit principals' perceptions on their major responsibilities, their challenges, and the fulfillment in their positions as school principals (See Appendix).

### **Demographic Data Analysis**

Data analysis showed more male principals (71.6%) than female principals participating in the study. Over half of the principals were between the ages of 41 and 50 (55.6%). Most of the participating principals (73.9%) were from secondary schools.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Results of data analysis indicated that the average mean response of Chinese principals was 4.171 out of a 5-point scale of measurement. Seven profile areas of principalship were examined with analysis results of means as follows: character (4.512), professional knowledge (4.122), administrative skills (4.206), administrative style (4.202), administrative duties (4.111), personnel management (4.052), and student affairs management (3.989).

The impact of gender, age, and school level on school principals' roles and responsibilities was examined by using One-Way Analysis of Variance. When roles and responsibilities of male principals were compared with those of female principals in China, no significant difference was found. In age comparison, of the seven areas of principal profile, only *skills* was found to be significant at the .05 level ( $F = 2.739$ ) in favor of the age group of 31 – 40 year old principals. No significant difference was found in any area of the principals' roles and responsibilities between elementary and secondary school principals in China.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Observation was made to the emerging patterns and consistencies in themes and patterns as prevailed among the principals' responses to the open-ended questions. Analysis of qualitative data indicated that major responsibilities as perceived by Chinese principals were goal setting, personnel issues, public relations and school culture. In response to the challenges they were facing, school principals in China agreed on personnel issues as their common challenges. Other unique challenges include community expectation of school outcome and pressure from local boards. In the fulfillment of a school principal's job, school principals in China highlighted their greatest fulfillment in seeing student achievement, working with professional faculty and staff, and gaining community support.

## **CHAN AND LIU STUDY 2017**

The Chan and Liu study (2017) is actually a replication of the Chan and Du study of 2008. It also aimed at examining the roles and responsibilities of Chinese school principals. A total of 43 school principals from Changsha area, Hunan Province, participated in the study. The same thirty item survey instrument was used to solicit data from school principals. The instrument also included a set of three open-ended questions to review principals' perception of their major responsibilities, challenges and job fulfillment.

### **Demographic Data Analysis**

Analysis of school principals' demographic data showed that 67.4% of participating principals were males and 32.6% were females. In school level, 51.2% of the principals were from elementary schools and 48.8% from secondary schools. More than half of the principals (51.2%) were in the age group of 41 to 50 years old.

## Quantitative Data Analysis

Results of data analysis indicated that the average mean response of Chinese principals was 3.719 out of a 5-point scale survey. Seven profile areas of principalship were examined with results of means as follows: character (3.651), professional knowledge (3.623), administrative skills (3.823), administrative style (4.372), administrative duties (3.824), personnel management (3.442), and student affairs management (3.529).

The impact of gender, age, and school level on school principals' roles and responsibilities was examined by using One-Way Analysis of Variance. No significant difference was found in principals' roles and responsibilities between male and female principals. In school level comparison, no significant difference was detected in principals' responses between elementary and secondary school level either. In comparing principals' perceptions among principals' age groups, of the seven areas of principal profile, only *character* was found to be significant at the .05 level ( $F = 7.577$ ) in favor of the age group of 31 – 40 year old principals.

## Qualitative Data Analysis

Most Chinese school principals confirmed that their major responsibility was to create a safe and inductive environment to support teaching and learning in school. Improvement of instruction was the focus of their responsibility. with reference to challenge in work, many principals identified the development of future planning strategies of school as challenging. They also claimed that in such planning effort, coordinating all involved stakeholders was very challenging too. In their job fulfillment, principals almost unanimously agreed that instructional improvement resulting in enhanced student achievement gave them the greatest satisfaction. This was the attainment of their professional goal.

## DISCUSSION

The two studies of principals' roles and responsibilities were conducted ten years apart, one in seven southern Chinese provinces and one focused in Central China, with the same survey instrument and the same analytical approach. The findings of these two studies have generated similarities and differences worthy of discussion in the following:

First, in demographic data comparison, both studies were dominated by male principal participation (71.6% in Chan and Du study and 67.4% in Chan and Liu study). Most of the principals in Chan and Du study (73.9%) were from secondary schools whereas, in Chan and Liu study, principal participation from elementary and secondary levels was about half and half (51.2% vs 48.8%). Interestingly, most principals participating in both studies came from the same 41 to 50 year old age group (55.6% in Chan and Du study and 51.2% in Chan and Liu study).

Second, in the impact of participants' demographics, both studies indicated no significant difference in principals' responses between male and female and between elementary and secondary school levels. However, in both studies, principals' self-perceived roles and responsibilities did indicate significant differences among different age groups in favor of those principals aging between 31 to 40 years old. This is showing that young school principals were displaying more excitement in their daily work as indicated in their comparatively higher rating responses.

Third, in general, school principals from the Chan and Du study (2008) were showing higher rating of responses to all the items in the survey than those from the Chan and Liu study (2017) except for *Style* (See Table 1). In the Chan and Du study, the highest rating was *Character* (4.512) and the lowest rating was *Student Affairs* (3.989) whereas, in the Chan and Liu study, the highest rating was *Style* (4.372) and the lowest rating was *Personnel Management* (3.442). Since the Chan and Du study was conducted in seven provinces in 2008 and the Chan and Liu study was

performed in Central China in 2017, because of the difference in time and geographical location, any direct comparison between corresponding subsets of the two studies is inappropriate.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics – School Principals’ Responses by Total and Subsets

Total Average and Subsets	Mean Chan and Du Study 2008	Mean Chan and Liu Study 2017
Total Average	4.171	3.719
Character	4.512	3.651
Knowledge	4.122	3.623
Skill	4.206	3.823
Style	4.202	4.372
Duties	4.111	3.824
Personnel Management	4.052	3.442
Student Affairs	3.989	3.529

Fourth, the subsets of Personnel Management and Student Affairs were rated low in both studies (See Table 1). This is an indication that much of the principals’ attention was paid to the instructional end of their daily work while personnel management and student affairs were given a low priority.

Fifth, principals’ answers to the open-ended question of challenges have disclosed that personnel management and coordination of stakeholders were challenging issues in both studies. This is directly reflecting the low personnel management self-rating by the principals in their quantitative responses.

Sixth, the findings of both studies indicated that school principals considered advancement in student achievement as their greatest job fulfillment. This is what they set their goals for and certainly goal attainment as shown in enhanced student achievement gave them the greatest satisfaction.

Seventh, Pang (2001) claimed that school principals were perceived by teachers for not paying enough attention to curriculum and instructional matters. However, the findings of these two studies (Chan and Du, 2008; Chan and Liu, 2017) disagreed with the findings of Pang’s study. The participating principals in these two studies made improvement of student achievement a top priority. This is in alignment with the findings of studies performed by Shi (2008), Xia (2012) and Zhou and Xia (2009) that promoted strong curriculum leadership of school principals.

Eighth, of the three types of principal leadership identified by Wang and Ren (2012): the ‘performance-orientated’ principals, ‘performance and research orientated’ principals and the ‘expert-type’ principals, the participating principals in these two studies were mostly practice focused. Their goal was to try their best to perform as expected of the standard practices of principalship. They certainly belonged to the ‘performance-orientated’ type.

Ninth, administrative style of school principals was rated relatively high as a result of these two studies. This is indicating that the participating principals were open to democratic styles of leadership and were ready to share school leadership with their colleagues. Zhang’s study (1998) also concluded that Chinese school principals were willing to employ a leadership style more toward democracy.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING**

The findings of these two studies of Chinese principalship have significant implications for the planning of educational leadership programs, the practice of school leadership and the planning for research in educational leadership. Even though these studies were conducted in China, the significance of their findings can be applied to any educational situation world-wide. International educators can learn from one another by sharing their unique experiences.

### **Planning for Leadership Preparation**

Chinese school principals in these two studies were obviously strongly influenced by the western educational leadership philosophy of curriculum leadership. Most of the participating principals expressed their desire to focus their work on developing school curriculum and class instructional activities with the purpose of enhancing student achievement. However, the results of these studies also indicated that these principals were placing other important aspects of their work such as personnel management and student affairs direction in low priorities. In planning for educational leadership development programs, a strong message has to be delivered to all aspiring school leaders that successful principalship is not dependent on curriculum leadership alone. A school principal plays many roles and needs to undertake multiple responsibilities. The eventual goal is to achieve student success. Perhaps, consideration has to be given to initiating a strong school administrative internship program to demonstrate a good balance of a principal's daily work.

### **Planning for School Leadership Practices**

The results of these two Chinese principal studies have indicated the need for balanced responsibilities of a school principal's daily work as mentioned in the last paragraph. Central to that, a network of strong communication has to be established between principals and their teachers and staffs in school. A successful school is a school of collaborative effort of all the stakeholders in the relationship building process. Among all the contributing factors to school success, the principal plays the key leadership role through goal setting and planning development of the school.

### **Planning for Research in Educational Leadership**

The two Chinese principalship studies reviewed in this article (Chan & Du, 2008; Chan & Liu, 2017) were conducted almost ten years apart at different parts of China. Obviously, when the first study was performed, there was no plan for a longitudinal study to be followed. The second study was picked up incidentally with a new research partner. Even though the same survey instrument was used in both studies, time and location differences of the studies make it difficult for direct item by item comparison to be meaningful. In planning for future studies on educational leadership, it makes good sense that the researchers follow the same group of school principals for a period of time to allow change to happen before coming back for another survey with the same research instrument.

Additionally, we learn that in performing these two studies, current significant literature on Chinese school principalship was searched and presented. These supportive references serve as a solid conceptual background for the findings of these studies to rely on. The readers find it interesting to be able to compare and reference current studies with previous studies on school principal leadership. It is evident that future international studies of school leadership need to emphasize on citing and referencing school leadership literature of the countries where the studies are conducted.

Furthermore, it makes good sense for some kind of action research be conducted by school faculty to examine if certain new teaching initiatives work in the classrooms. The principal can take the leadership in the development of such research effort. A ‘performance and research-orientated’ principal as described by Wang and Ren (2012) can contribute to determining the effectiveness of instructional strategies in school.

## CONCLUSION

The studies of Chinese school principalship by Chan and Du (2008) and Chan and Liu (2017) were critically reviewed in this paper with foci on methodologies and findings. It is recommended that a longitudinal approach of school principal study would certainly yield very meaningful results through direct comparison of principals’ responses through the time differences. The outcomes of these two studies have indicated an unbalanced distribution of time and effort principals spent on performing their daily duties. They serve to call the attention of school principals world-wide that their roles and responsibilities are multiple and the community has high expectation of principals’ performance in all aspects of school operation. It is obvious that increased international competitiveness today has made the work of school principals more difficult through pressure to enhance student success. Principals of different countries have much to share in their unique experiences in school leadership.

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5. ( ) A school principal needs to have good knowledge of educational philosophies to fulfill the responsibility of fostering students' educational development.
6. ( ) A school principal needs to have a good scientific and cultural background in general to that he/she can work with quality improvement of instruction.
7. ( ) A school principal does not need to have knowledge of educational studies, psychology and school administration to lead a school.
8. ( ) A school principal needs to constantly improve himself/herself by learning new leadership principles and skills.

#### PROFESSIONAL SKILL

9. ( ) A school principal needs to have intellectual judgment to assign his/her faculty and staff to the corresponding positions compatible with their capabilities.
10. ( ) A school principal does not need to coordinate the efforts of different departments in the school.
11. ( ) A school principal needs to have excellent analytical skills to manage school business.
12. ( ) A school principal needs to exercise his/her leadership by making wise decisions for the school.
13. ( ) A school principal needs to manage his/her time wisely to enhance the work efficiency of the school.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE STYLE

14. ( ) A school principal needs to encourage democracy in school. This will stimulate enthusiastic participation of the faculty, staff and parents toward decision making in school.
15. ( ) A school principal needs to conduct a self-evaluation of his/her performance.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE DUTIES

16. ( ) A school principal needs to develop a plan for the school's future development with specific goals and objectives to be followed.
17. ( ) A school principal needs to focus on his/her administrative work. Instructional activities are not the primarily concern.
18. ( ) A school principal needs to continuously improve the quality of his/her school to meet the on-coming challenges.
19. ( ) A school principal manages all the school resources to support instructional activities.
20. ( ) A school principal needs to communicate well with his/her superiors to ensure proper implementation of the educational policies.
21. ( ) A school principal needs to develop the instructional program by placing an appropriate balance between the moral, academic, aesthetic, social and physical development of school children.
22. ( ) A school principal needs to develop an educational environment conducive to learning.

#### PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

23. ( ) It is not necessary for a school principal to encourage his/her faculty and staff to continue improvement in their areas of expertise.
24. ( ) A school principal needs to closely supervise his/her faculty and staff to ensure the accomplishment of educational goals.

25. ( ) A school principal needs to encourage his/her faculty and staff to actively participate in the management of school affairs.
26. ( ) A school principal needs to assist in the professional development of his/her faculty and staff by formally and informally evaluating their performance.

#### STUDENT AFFAIRS MANAGEMENT

27. ( ) A school principal needs to develop a counseling program to assist needy students with their academic problems and personal stress.
28. ( ) A school principal does not need to maintain good school discipline to ensure a conducive learning environment.
29. ( ) A school principal needs to help students understand the purpose of learning so that they can develop a positive attitude toward school work.
30. ( ) A school principal needs to work with his/her faculty and staff to provide guidance to students concerning their political thinking orientation.

**Part II.** Please respond to the following questions about school principalship:

1. What do you perceive as the major responsibility of a school principal?
2. What are the major challenges of a school principal today?
3. What is fulfilling about the work of a school principal?
4. Other comments: