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Deanship at Chinese Universities: A Thematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Deanship, the critical middle level of leadership in higher education, has been a relatively understudied area in the Chinese context. Academic deans play significant roles in higher education, as they connect university leaders, administrative staff, faculty members, students, and the public. With the changing environment within and outside higher education, academic deans are encountering increasing role conflicts and challenges. Most of the literature discussing deanship has been concerned deans in Western societies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and some countries in Europe. In China, deans' leadership is situated in a different cultural and political discourse in higher education institutions, as they interact with academic, administrative, and political leadership. This study aims to investigate the status quo of the literature on deanship in Chinese universities, identify knowledge gaps, compare the Chinese literature with the existing literature in the West, and suggest future research directions. This article uses a narrative review method to examine the literature about deanship and to extract major themes in the field: roles and performance, challenges, effectiveness, and leadership development. Using these themes, it explores the literature on academic deans' leadership in universities in China. The study found that the qualities necessary for deanship in Chinese universities emphasize deans', communication competence, capacity to balance academic and administrative roles and ability to deal with faculty members and university leaders under the Communist Party's leadership. Chinese academic deans have comparatively more constraints on their capacity to set goals and create vision in their faculties. They also face similar challenges to their counterparts in the West: role conflicts as scholars and academic managers, ambiguous expectations, and work stress. Suggestions and strategies for improving deans' leadership at Chinese universities are also put forward.

Keywords: deanship, higher education, literature review, Chinese universities, comparative studies

Introduction

Faculty deans are critical leaders who facilitate the development of universities. They bridge communication at different levels, serve as a hinge between the university leaders and the faculty members, have multiple roles in their institutions, and face stresses in different areas (e.g., Clift et al., 2015; De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). Deans' identities include everything from guardians of students and teachers, to chief academic leaders who influence higher education with their formal and informal leadership (Ren, 2008). As higher education institutions evolve rapidly with the trends of globalization, marketization, and new public management (NPM), the roles of faculty deans have become "more demanding, more senior, more strategic, more complex and more managerial in nature" (De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009, p. 1). Research about deanship, the middle level of leadership in higher education, has been under heated debate in many countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom (Bryman, 2007; Floyd, 2012; Harvey et al., 2013), Australia (e.g., Harvey et al., 2013; Pechar, 2010), and countries in Europe (e.g., de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Dinh et al., 2020).

The term "dean" originally referred to the leader of a group of monks in the monasteries of Medieval Europe. The early universities developed from these monasteries and churches, and this form of address for these leaders was retained. The earliest study of faculty deans emerged in the United States in the 1930s (McGinnis, 1933; McGrath, 1936), and studies about deanship as a type of middle-level leadership in universities first started to boom in the United States (e.g., Sarros et al., 1998; Tucker & Bryan, 1988) and later in countries like the United Kingdom and Australia (Pechar, 2010; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002). The earliest prototype of the academic dean in Chinese universities emerged as the branch supervisor at the Imperial University of Peking in the late Qing dynasty, following the model of the dean of faculty in Germany and Japanese universities (Liu & Yi, 2013). As the middle-level managers at the Imperial University, deans were associated with bureaucracy and professionalism at that time. In the modern era, research on academic deans in Chinese universities was not developed until the 1990s (e.g., Chen, 1999; Xu, 1990). Much of the

academic research in Chinese in this field has been translation of works from the Western literature. As the department–faculty structure has been widely adopted in many Chinese institutions, studies on department heads and academic deans have usually been categorized as discussions of middle-level management in universities.

The Changing Context of Higher Education for Deans

The roles of deans have evolved due to a changing external environment, the increasingly multiple functions of universities, and the new public management introduced in both higher education institutions and other organizations. In the past century, deans as the middle managers in academia have changed significantly (De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009). Take academic deans in the United States, for example. In the 1960s in the United States, the primary functions of academic deans “focused on the ends and means of higher education, the academic program and its recipients, and academic budgets.” By the 1980s, more management duties were added to the responsibilities of deans, such as tackling extraordinary circumstances, curriculum development, and faculty personnel issues (e.g., Tucker & Bryan, 1988). By the 1990s, deans needed to represent the university in the community, increase the diversity of students and faculty members, and act as political advocates and solicitors of influence from college outsiders (Montez et al., 2003).

Tucker and Bryan (1988) used metaphors for deans such as *dove*, *dragon*, and *diplomat* in their book because deans are required to behave differently according to different circumstances. They not only implement organizational policies, but also hold the key positions in the process of agenda setting, organizational strategy development, and policy design. They connect organizational strategies and implementation, which is significant to institutional success (De Boer, 2009). However, it does not always hold true that middle managers advocate to achieve organizational goals. Sometimes they may use their positions and power to accelerate their own interests (Montez et al., 2003).

In China, university leadership, which has gained many scholars’ attention (e.g., Huang, 2017; Shen et al., 2020; Zhou, 2012), and leadership in higher education institutions in general,

are usually discussed in the framework of university governance and power discourse (Jia et al., 2019; Zhao & Jones, 2017). Political power is another important force beyond administrative and academic consideration (Fan et al., 2013). Only a few studies have discussed faculty deans in Chinese universities (e.g., Jin & Wang, 2014; Ren, 2008). In Chinese universities, like on the governing boards of Western higher education institutions, “shared governance” has been implemented: in China, this takes the form of the “Party–Administration joint meeting mechanism” (党政联席 or “Joint Governance Mechanism” hereafter) (Zhuang & Liu, 2020). Under the leadership of the Joint Governance Mechanism, faculty members’ engagement in the university and in the faculty is limited. Academic deans, who link the administrative staff and academic professors, may have tension created by another layer of power. The power relations in Chinese universities are also constructed in a different landscape than the Western one. According to a study by Jia et al. (2019), for Chinese academics, being a dean may result in a higher number of publications because they have access to more coauthors within the same institution.

However, higher education leadership is different from leadership in other sectors because of the demands of academic freedom and academic autonomy for individual academics and for higher education institutions. Therefore, effective leadership at the middle level has to navigate between formal academic leadership for the purposes of institutional development, and informal academic leadership for the intellectual development of scholars in specific academic disciplines.

This study sought to find the research gaps in this area by conducting a thematic literature review on deanship in Chinese universities. The study was aimed to delve into the literature about deanship in universities around the world and extract its main themes, which were used as the structure for analyzing deanship in Chinese universities. The need for leadership development for dean-level leaders in Chinese higher education has seldom been discussed. This study, therefore, was intended to bring insights from the related literature to analyze Chinese deanship.

Methods and Rationales for Selecting the Themes

There are different approaches to conducting a literature review. The first type is the critical or narrative review that is commonly applied in academic theses. It takes different formats such as editorials, commentaries, or narrative overviews that report findings based on published literature; however, all of these formats can be categorized as “unsystematic” (Green et al., 2006, p. 103). This method relies heavily on the authors’ perspectives and intuition, but it provides ample space for the literature reviewers to theorize after collecting and evaluating the evidence. The second type is the systematic review, with “more transparent, structured and comprehensive approaches” (Bearman et al., 2012, p. 103).

Systematic literature review requires a clearly stated set of objectives with pre-defined research questions and criteria, a well-explained reproducible methodology, a holistic search for all studies that would fit the predefined criteria, and an assessment of the validity of the findings of the included studies (Bearman, 2012, p. 627). This approach tends to theorize before data collection to prevent bias. Therefore, in a case in which literature reviewers wish to investigate the landscape of a topic instead of beginning with a very specific research question or hypothesis, narrative review is a more suitable approach (Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

The goals of a literature review vary. They can include developing an innovative conceptualization or theory; evaluating a theory; investigating the state of knowledge on a certain research topic; identifying problems, weaknesses, and contradictions; or offering a historical account of the evolution of a theory on a topic (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). This study was aimed to assess the current state of research on deanship in Chinese universities and to point out characteristics and challenges of deanship in this context, as well as future research directions. The research questions were: What are the main themes related to deanship in Chinese universities in the existing literature? What are the needs of leadership development at the dean/school-head levels in China?

Therefore, the narrative review method was used to analyze academic deans’ leadership in

Chinese universities. Several steps were performed (Juntunen & Lehenkari, 2021). First, the topic was selected based on the observation of relevant research on leadership in Chinese higher education, in which very limited discussion about academic deans' leadership had been found. The initial literature search was conducted on the topic of deans' leadership in major English databases (Google Scholar and Web of Science), where numerous published peer-reviewed articles and books about academic deans' roles, behaviors, conflicts, and traits in Western societies were found. However, almost none of the English publications focused mainly on deanship at Chinese universities, and only a very few were related to deans' roles in Chinese university governance (e.g., Jia et al., 2019; Wu, 2018).

Second, the empirical and analytical articles on deanship located in Step 1 were examined to understand the general status of existing deanship studies in the West, in countries and regions like the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Europe. The main themes in this literature were coded and the goal of this study was further defined: to analyze and compare the state of the literature on Chinese deans' leadership based on these main themes on deanship in Western societies.

Third, based on various themes defined in the second step, such as deans' characteristics, skill sets, conflicts, role, norms, and effectiveness, relevant articles were searched in the China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database (CAJD), the largest full-text database of academic journals published in China, as a first stage, and then searched in key Chinese journals of higher education as a second stage (Juntunen & Lehenkari, 2021). Excluding academic books and dissertations, we searched for keywords such as "university dean's leadership" and "university dean's roles"; we later extended the search to include the Chinese terms for "dean's stress," "dean's duties," and "dean's competency" based on the relevance of the literature that emerged during the search process. In total, 58 journal articles related to deanship in Chinese universities were identified. Thirty-six articles containing anecdotal reflections or essays were excluded, and the other 22 articles were carefully analyzed based on the themes extracted in the second step. These

themes are discussed below and the results of the analysis are presented in the Findings section.

Multiple Roles of Deans

Various conflicts resulting from the different roles of academic deans have been discussed (e.g., de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Montez et al., 2003). Academic deans have often found themselves caught between different expectations from students and faculty, from their faculty and the administration, or from the public and the administration. In the 1998 National Survey of Academic Deans (NSAD), the Deans' Task Inventory was developed to show a series of tasks that deans perform, including *external and political relations, personal scholarship, leadership, resource management, internal productivity, and personnel*.

Deans' leadership styles differ according to their type, their position, and the power they hold in the internal institution (Mignot-Gérard, 2010). Some previous studies (e.g., Rosser et al., 2003) have developed academic deans' leadership domains, such as *vision and goal setting, management of the unit, interpersonal relationships, communication skills, research, professional and community endeavors, quality of unit's education, and support for institutional diversity*. Bray (2012) developed norms for academic deans based on empirical studies and the codes of conduct of academic professional associations and institutions. Academic deans are expected to be *excellent communicators* and to inform their faculty members and administrative staff with the right amount of information and data. They also should be *transparent* and explain the clear process for promotion and tenure. They are expected to be collegial and to *follow agree-upon decisions, particularly programmatic, curricular, and budgetary decisions*. Deans are ought to be *judges* who cultivate and oversee an ethical and moral culture (Bray, 2012, p. 24).

In addition to having expectations of *what to do*, deans also have expectations of *what not to do*. Bray's study (2008) analyzed faculty members' perceptions of the inappropriateness of deans behaviors. Among many aspects of deans' behaviors, *inept evaluation and representation, failure to communicate, fiscal intemperance, and regulator disdain* were considered the "high crimes" for

deans. Bray also showed that deans' roles were viewed differently in different types of institutions and across different disciplines.

Various Challenges for Deans

As the definition of what a dean does is so complicated, and this role comes with diverse expectations from multiple stakeholders, deans have to tackle various challenges. In a study by Montez et al. (2003) based on the National Survey of Academic Deans, different layers of deans' tasks sometimes were incompatible. For instance, managing *external and political relations*, such as obtaining and managing external funds, may conflict with *personal scholarship* activities such as demonstrating scholarship by publishing or presenting papers regularly, or *leadership* activities such as soliciting ideas to improve the college. Montez et al. concluded that the top three challenges deans perceived were related to fiscal issues, administration, and curriculum and program development. Even within a single academic unit, the perception of deans' leadership can be different for students, administrators, and faculty members at different career stages and for deans themselves in different research fields. The academic profession is also changing with a higher level of marketization and commoditization. Academics' commitment to and engagement in their department, and their university, are in decline (De Boer, 2009).

In addition, the disconnection and distrust between academics and managers and the fragile relationship between faculty and administrators have been concerns for deans (Del Favero & Bray, 2010). Faculty members worry that administrators may cross their boundaries to suppress the power of academic professionals, even though many academic deans and directors have a background as faculty members (Bray, 2012).

Developing the Effectiveness of Deanship

The roles and functions of academic deans and directors are differently perceived by students, faculty, provosts, and deans themselves. The effectiveness of deans' work can be evaluated. The study by Rosser et al. (2003) in the United States suggested that the effectiveness of deans'

leadership is not only embedded in the individual level, but also the organizational level. Deanship effectiveness should be assessed not only by the university management team, but also by faculty members and administrative staff. In the setting of an academic unit, “leader effectiveness depends upon an equity in social exchange with the leader gaining status and exercising influence while helping the group to achieve desired mutual outcomes, as well as the individual leader achieving social rewards, such as recognition” (Hollander, 1965 & 1978, cited by Rosser et al., 2003, p. 5).

As deans’ main roles have both an administrative and an academic nature, deans’ tasks, especially their tasks as academic administrators, are not easy to understand; academic norms are often in conflict with administrative ones (Bray, 2008). Even though deans are considered to have experience with higher education institutions and to be resourceful enough to deal with different kinds of circumstances, formal guidance and assessment for deans is often lacking (Bray, 2012). Preston and Floyd (2016) in the United Kingdom examined the types of training and role preparation that associate deans had had. They found that about 60 percent of associate deans had received little or no formal training in management. Informal learning and support networks with other associate deans were critical sources of support. Floyd (2012) also argued that more support and individually tailored training should be offered to middle managers to develop and deliver leadership more effectively.

Findings

Significance of Researching Deanship at Universities in China

Since 2016, the Ministry of Education in China has launched a “Double First-Class Initiative” aiming to build several world-class universities, and faculty members that are responsible for teaching, research, and service play a significant role in the university construction process (Li, 2020). Deans’ leadership roles may determine the academic environment in their faculties (or departments), which is related to the quality of academic work faculty members produce (Deng et al., 2017; Wen & Zhong, 2008; Xu, 2019). Furthermore, deans may impact scholars’ beliefs and

commitment to their universities (Yu, 2013). The development of Chinese higher education has expanded the scale of universities, which may bring some problems (Yu, 2013). Moreover, deanship is of vital importance for university development and improvement, as deans manage professors from different disciplines. In China, they are responsible for faculty development, and deans' innovation ability can influence faculty members' participation in departmental activities (Han, 2007). Deans' leadership may influence the development and organization of universities (Yu, 2011).

Many studies have been conducted about professors, students, and university leaders in China, but the study of deans' leadership has not enough attracted scholars' attention (Wang, 2020). There has been very limited research about deans at universities in China (Wang, 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Yu, 2011). This may result in misunderstanding about this position. It is crucial to conduct research about deans' leadership, as it will benefit both deans' development and university administration (Wang, 2016).

According to Wang (2015), universities in China have experienced reform in the past 40 years, and the focus of Chinese universities has moved to the quality of universities, in which teacher recruitment, student learning, and activity organization are important. Deans play a significant role in all of these activities within faculties and departments. Studies about deans' leadership in higher education, which may be important for university improvement, will enhance the development of post-secondary education in Chinese universities (Zhang & Fang, 2009).

Qualities Necessary for Deanship at Universities in China

Scholars have explored the qualities that deans need to play their leadership roles at universities in China. Some argue that the primary role of a dean should be the academic leader, who recognize scholars' value and have established experience in the academic community (e.g., Guo & Yan, 2014). It is essential for deans to have the capacity to deal with changes and carry out new initiatives in their institutions (Middle-Level University Leader Competency Research Group, 2014). Moreover, university deans also must have the ability to monitor and plan for the future.

These all primarily require deans to have logical thinking ability. An effective dean also has be able to convince others and to innovate (Jin & Wang, 2014; Middle-Level University Leader Competency Research Group, 2014). Only in this way can deans make progress in leadership capacity. They also need excellent interpersonal relationships with others, as they may have to cope with conflicts in schools (Han, 2007; Jin et al., 2014; Middle-Level University Leader Competency Research Group, 2014; Wang et al., 2018; Xie et al., 2014; Zheng & Ye, 2017).

Deans's confidence and interaction skills are pivotal when they confront challenges and overcome difficulties at work. Deng et al. (2017) believed that deans' communication ability may impact school staff's working efficiency, and school staff's attitudes about deans' performance in managing their school is related to their willingness to participate in school activities. Han (2007) held that integrity, knowledge base, and personality may influence the effectiveness of deans at universities. According to the Communist Party of China (CPC) at China West Normal University (2004), integrity includes deans' insight into school development and cognitive ability. Furthermore, a good leader should be open to others' ideas and criticisms. Deans need to learn about each school staff member's advantages and disadvantages, as this is beneficial for reaching each staff member's potential (CPC, 2004). Deans' sound judgment is also very important, as deans need to deal with the complex relationship between faculty and the university (Yu, 2001). In this process, deans need to be aware of the responsibilities of all faculty members (Yu, 2001).

Challenges of Deanship at Universities in China

There is a wide range of challenges and barriers for deans at universities in China. The most obvious challenge for deans is role conflict, which is caused by a wide range of factors such as interpersonal relationships, school environment, and personality (Ren, 2013; Xie et al., 2014; Yu & Duan, 2018). Deans are the leaders of a faculty, rather like the managers of a company, and some university deans are also scholars who are responsible for teaching and research (Jiang, 2011; Ren, 2013; Zheng & Ye, 2017), as well as politics (Cao, 2021; Zhang & Fang, 2009). This requires deans to consider both the requirement of their universities and the demands of their research

discipline. These many roles has increased the possibility of their role conflicts and inevitably to high level of stress (Cao, 2021; Jiang, 2011; Li, 2020). Having to deal with these role conflicts may reduce the effectiveness of deans' leadership (Ren, 2013). Deans have to interact with faculty and consider their suggestions, which requires deans to balance between their roles as leaders and scholars (Ren, 2013).

There are two kinds of role conflicts for deans. One is the conflict between deans' job demands and the expectations from their universities (Ren, 2008; Zheng & Ye, 2017). The other one is the conflict between deans' duties and the resources available to them (Ren, 2008). It is noteworthy that these conflicts are more obvious in top universities in China (Ren, 2008). The hierarchical structure of universities' management systems in China make deans more likely to get access to internal and external resources. Those at the top universities in China are less willing to continue in deanship positions because they have relatively more access to academic resources and opportunities with their academic capacity and institutional fame; for those in the second- or third-tier institutions, they depend more heavily on this role (Chen, 2005; Lu & Smith, 2020; Ren, 2008).

What is more, the special situation in China has made deans experience significant conflict between their role as managers and their role as researchers, as deans are directly responsible for the academic and administrative affairs assigned by the Communist Party of China (Zhang & Fang, 2009). One disadvantage of this situation is that deans may not actively play their leadership roles, as they cannot be creative in making decisions about faculty reform (Zhang & Fang, 2009).

Moreover, some deans lack the knowledge and interaction skills needed to serve in leadership positions (Cao, 2021; Liang & Cong, 2011). Furthermore, some managers at universities are weak in leadership skills and concentrate too much on their interpersonal relationship with others (Xie et al., 2014). Moreover, the incompatibility of hierarchical structure, academic value, unclear expectations from different stakeholders may impede deans' leadership roles at universities (Xu, 2019; Zheng & Ye, 2017).

Deans are also under pressure because universities do not have clear standards for what it

means to be a leader in a faculty. There are no clear expectations for deans at universities in China. This may cause difficulties for their leadership, as deans may have to deal with many affairs that technically lie beyond their duties (Ren, 2013). Furthermore, deans can find it hard to set development goals for their schools, and these goals may also be changed as schools develop (Liang & Cong, 2011; Yu, 2013). Therefore, deans at universities in China are confronted with various barriers to their leadership roles.

Other areas that may bring challenges for deans are deans' educational background and the types of universities in which they work. Deans at universities who have excellent educational backgrounds and work at top universities felt higher level of pressure compared to others (Ren, 2011b). Those who hold doctoral degrees and had better academic records tended to identify themselves as researchers, have more participation in academic activities, and have higher expectation for themselves (Ren, 2011a). Hence, their dual roles as faculty leaders and scholars led to more tension and stress.

Deans at Chinese universities suffer from role anxiety, including time anxiety, relationship anxiety, and system anxiety (Wang, 2020). In terms of time anxiety, deans' administrative duties deeply influence the amount of time they have for conducting research, and it may feel extremely stressful for deans to transition between their roles as teachers, administrators, and researchers (Wang, 2020). In terms of relationship anxiety, it may cost tremendous time for deans to connect with people from different departments using various strategies (Wang, 2020). When it comes to system anxiety, the unclear role expectations makes it a rough task for deans to fulfill their missions (Wang, 2020; Zheng & Ye, 2017). Furthermore, there are still many other barriers that may lead to deans' anxiety at universities in China, including a lack of management skills, the absence of a plan (Wen & Zhong, 2008).

Types of Leadership for Deans at Universities in China

Scholars have investigated the roles of deans' different sorts of leadership, including transformational leadership, academic leadership, and intellectual leadership, at Chinese

universities. Deans' transformational leadership is indispensable to launching new initiatives and dealing with all the conflicts at universities in China (Liu, 2014; Yu, 2013). In addition, academic leadership is necessary for deans in higher education. According to Dinh et al. (2020), academic leadership that includes "personal & interpersonal capacities, academic capacity, leadership styles, [and] leadership capacity" (p.10), including positional power and networking with all of the members at universities. Deans' academic leadership, which is related to the implementation of policies and financial administration, may impact the effectiveness of universities. Moreover, academic leadership may influence deans' commitment to universities (Dinh et al., 2020). This indicates that deans' academic leadership is complicated, connecting with both academic skills and management skills, which also overlaps intellectual leadership in higher education institutions to some extent (Oleksiyenko & Ruan, 2018).

Factors Influencing Deanship at Universities in China

There are many factors influencing deans' leadership at universities. These factors include gender, rank, and educational background. In China, only a very small number of university leaders are female, and many female faculty managers are willing to accept their academic identities instead of leadership identities (Liu, 2014; Zhao & Jones, 2017). In other words, many women enjoy academic positions rather than leadership positions (Zhao & Jones, 2017). Moreover, Confucianism still has a deep influence on attitudes towards women's leadership in China. This may bring some social barriers for women deans at Chinese universities. In many deans' view, their academic duties are more important than their leadership duties (Guo & Yan, 2014; Liu, 2014). It may take a long time to become a dean in a leadership position, and this requires communication between staff at universities. Thus, the school environment is indispensable for deanship. An inclusive school culture where staff trust each other is helpful for effective leadership (Huang, 2008). Traditional Chinese cultural values, such as harmony and socialism, are related to the effectiveness of leadership in higher education in China (Lu & Smith, 2020).

Recommendations and Strategies for Improving Deans' Leadership at Chinese Universities

Setting Clear Role Expectations

Based on their research on deans' role conflicts at Chinese universities, Li (2020), Ren (2011), and Yu (2001) made some recommendations for improving deans' leadership at Chinese universities. First, it is necessary to formulate clear expectations for deans. The current university system in China asks deans to be both managers and scholars, which puts a lot of pressure on them. Clarifying deans' roles would be helpful for reducing deans' workload. Second, it is indispensable to give deans in faculties more rights and choices in management. The current university system in China may cause conflicts between deans and academic managers in other school departments, as the deans do not have many rights to make decisions about faculty development. Third, university leaders, such as presidents, need to attach importance to deans' mental health, which is connected with deans' leadership roles in their faculties. There should be clear expectations not only for deans but also for other stakeholders in the faculty, such as associate deans and department heads (Yu, 2001). In addition, it is necessary to clarify the academic and management duties of all faculty managers at universities in China (Yu, 2011).

Expectations for deans can be different during various stages of university development (Quan & Zhang, 2017). There are a variety of powers, including executive power, academic power, and market power, at universities in China, and the power relations at universities may change as time goes by (Feng, 2011; Quan & Zhang, 2017; Wen & Zhong, 2008). Deans need to find a balance between all of these power relations (Quan & Zhang, 2017). In addition, Chinese universities, which are also led by the Communist Party of China, are very different from many universities in Western society (Zhang & Fang, 2009). Jing and Chu (2009) maintained that it is necessary and beneficial for universities to have explicit standards or guidelines for deans, which allow deans to have a clear understanding about their roles and responsibilities and follow university policies easily (Yu, 2001). Moreover, there should be a mechanism whereby faculty members can provide feedback on the effectiveness of deans' work, and provide input into decision

making about the general affairs in their faculties (Yu, 2001; Zhang & Fang, 2009). What is more, clear expectations for deans would be helpful for improving the collaboration between Chinese universities and the Communist Party of China (Zhang & Fang, 2009). When universities start to set expectations for deans, it will be indispensable for them to consider the influence of different powers.

In order to have a harmonious relationship with others at universities, deans in turn need to give faculty members clear expectations about their roles and about faculty reform (Feng, 2011; Jin & Wang, 2014; Xu, 2019). In other words, deans ought to keep their colleagues well-informed so that they can cooperate and interact with each other. While leading faculties and schools, deans' ability to make sound judgments is important, and deans' interactive skills may impact their performance at universities (Han, 2007).

Clear expectations in faculties are beneficial for deans when they collaborate with other stakeholders in their faculties, and thus may have a positive influence on university development (Cao, 2021; Zhang & Fang, 2009). Setting clear role expectations would help deans to reduce their role conflicts at universities. In addition, at Chinese universities, most deans need to cooperate with the secretary of the Party Committee to manage their faculties. This requires universities to set up distinct expectations for deans and secretaries (Zhang & Fang, 2009).

Promoting Social Networking and Professional Development for Deans at Universities

Cooperation is critical at Chinese universities. Deans need to foster collaboration between administrators, instructors, and students and attempt to make everyone in their institution take part in university activities; this is beneficial for building trust (Feng, 2011; Xie et al., 2014). What is more, deans at Chinese universities need to be willing to cooperate with and learn from others (Huang, 2008). In addition, it is critical to have professional development for deans to guide them on how to play their leadership roles at universities, and university leaders need to decrease the amount of work expected of deans, which would help reduce their role conflicts and anxiety (Liang & Cong, 2011; Wang, 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

Many universities may organize activities for deans to foster their interaction with others, and this is a good way to build trust between deans and faculty members (Feng, 2011). Deans need these social networking activities to improve their ability to communicate with others (Feng, 2011). In addition, social networking, which may be regarded as a part of professional development, is crucial for deans to learn from others (Wang et al., 2020). In 2011, there was a professional development plan called the Deans' Excellence Development Plan in Management Faculty (“管理学院院长卓越计划”), whereby deans from various universities could share with each other the ways they managed their faculties, their ideas for student development, and useful resources, and a great number of deans benefited a lot from this activity (China Education Online Business School, 2011).

Building a Clear Monitoring and Evaluation System

Universities in China have started to monitor and evaluate the work of their deans. This includes providing guidance for deans and giving awards to those deans who accomplish excellent work (Zhang & Fang, 2009). The monitoring system aims to inspire deans to have a positive attitude towards accomplishing their job requirements and motivate them to lead faculties better (Zhang & Fang, 2009).

Many Chinese universities have carried out evaluation system reforms for deans in an attempt to improve the deans' effectiveness (Zhang & Fang, 2009). The current evaluation systems, which should be reformed, are not friendly to deans at universities in China, as they contain a double standard for assessing deans' leadership and academic skills (Ren, 2011a). This method of evaluation has brought about a number of challenges for deans. To improve the evaluation systems may require monitoring deans' ability to lead their faculties and their capacity to deal with general affairs (Zhang & Fang, 2009). In addition, deans also need to let the members of their faculties take part in faculty development activities such as making decisions about policy (Cao, 2021; Zhang & Fang, 2009). The improved evaluation systems at Chinese universities may be helpful for enhancing the cooperation between deans and the secretaries of the Party Committee (Zhang

& Fang, 2009), as deans are assessed in specific elements, which may reduce their role conflicts (Ren, 2011a).

Deans may benefit from the evaluation system through reflecting on their own work (Li, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Wen & Zhong, 2008; Zhang & Fang, 2009). To enhance deans' leadership, evaluation systems should spare a safe space for deans to know about their weaknesses and allow them to learn from their colleagues' experience (CPC, 2004).

Enhancing the Professionalism of Deans

Some professional development workshops have been conducted to help deans to cope with general affairs (Jing & Chu, 2009). Some deans may not have expertise in faculty management, and professional development can help them improve their skills of administration and innovation (Jing & Chu, 2009; Wang, 2020). In addition, deans' professional development can help them better balance their administrative and research duties (Wang et al., 2020). In current Chinese universities, deans' research abilities play a significant role in leading faculties, as some deans also act as leaders in many disciplines (Wang et al., 2020). Therefore, deans may learn from their colleagues in other faculties and universities to improve themselves as both faculty managers and academic leaders (Wang et al., 2020).

Limitations of the Current Research about Deanship at Universities in China

Although scholars have attempted to analyze deanship from different perspectives, there are still many disadvantages to the current state of scholarship about deans' leadership at universities in China. There has been a lack of exploration of the connection between deans' leadership and society at large (Yu, 2011). With the universities in China becoming more open to the public, deans' leadership has been impacted by the social environment and resources outside the universities, which have brought a variety of challenges for deans (Li, 2020; Yu, 2011). Moreover, the number of studies about deanship from theoretical perspectives has been very limited, and there has been no clear definition of the major concepts related to deanship in these studies (Li, 2020). In addition,

researchers have not paid much attention to the role of interactions between deans and faculty members (Yu, 2011). Differences of deanships among other types of higher education institutions deserve more analysis, as currently more studies focus on the top comprehensive universities (such as Xu et al., 2018 and Wang et al., 2020).

Concluding Remarks

As the internal and external environment of higher education changes, the conceptualization and development of academic deanship are evolving. By researching the literature on academic deanship in both Western societies and in China, we found that deans in China require skills and qualities similar to those needed by their Western counterparts, such as the capacity to be excellent communicators who can bridge communication between all shareholders. However, fiscal management, especially the ability to search for external funds, may not be at the top of the list of academic deans' task inventory in China in the same way it is in the United States and the United Kingdom.

At the same time, East Asian cultural values, including harmony and cooperation, contribute to high demands for academic deans' personal virtues and integrity on top of their professional leadership in higher education in China. Cultural discourse can be taken into more consideration in future research that analyzes deans' leadership in Chinese universities.

In addition, the style of management and governance in Chinese higher education also helps shape deanship there (as discussed in Liu, 2019). Compared with existing studies in the West, Chinese research has shown that tasks such as goal setting and decision-making for Chinese academic deans may be under more influence from the central and provincial governments, as well as the party leadership in universities.

In Chinese studies about academic deans, sometimes there have been no clear boundaries between deanship and other forms of middle-level leadership. In contrast, studies of middle-level leadership in universities in the existing Western literature have included different types of leaders,

such as department (or school) heads (e.g., Bryman, 2007) and associate deans (Preston & Floy, 2016). The next stage of Chinese research in this area may require special attention to these specific areas.

In the future, more comparative studies can be done about deans' leadership to further facilitate understanding of academic deans and higher education management and administration in China and in other areas.

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