How Universities Work:

Understanding Higher Education Organization in Northwest China

Joseph B. Berger
Katherine E. Hudson
Gerardo Blanco Ramírez
University of Massachusetts Amherst
USA

Abstract: This study explores models of educational management used in postsecondary institutions in the five northwestern provinces of the People's Republic of China (Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shaanxi, and Xinjiang). As higher education in the People's Republic of China expands and undergoes significant changes, a nuanced understanding of the organizational structures in Chinese higher education is increasingly important. This qualitative study included group interviews with university administrators from institutions in each of the five northwestern provinces. Drawing on Birnbaum's (1988) seminal work describing models of organization in higher education in the United States, the findings suggest four models of organization that are for the Chinese context. These models are: Tiao-Kuai Xitong (Vertical-Horizontal system), Confucian Guanxi, Authoritarian, and Dialectical. The study explores the complexity and diversity that characterizes Chinese higher education with important implications for the ongoing educational reform within

China, as well as for developing a more sophisticated contextualized notion of Chinese higher education in the West.

Keywords: People's Republic of China; higher education; administrative organization; management systems; organizational theories; college administration

El funcionamiento de las universidades: Entendiendo las organizaciones de educación superior en China.

Resumen: El presente estudio explora los modelos de gestión empleados en instituciones de educación superior de cinco provincias de la República Popular de China (Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai y Xinjiang). A medida que la educación superior en la República Popular de China se expande y experimenta cambios importantes, un análisis detallado de las estructuras organizacionales de la educación superior china se vuelve cada vez más importante. Este estudio de caso cualitativo incorporó entrevistas grupales con administradores universitarios de instituciones en cinco provincias del noreste de China. Basándose en el trabajo de Birnbaum (1988) que sentó las bases para describir modelos organizacionales en los Estados Unidos, los resultados presentan cuatro modelos de organización en el contexto de China. Estos modelos son: Tiao-Kuai Xitong (sistema vertical-horizontal), Guanxi Confucionista, Autoritario y Dialéctico. El estudio explora la complejidad y diversidad que caracterizan a la educación superior china ya que éstas tienen implicaciones importantes para la reforma educativa en China así como para el desarrollo más sofisticado de ideas en contexto acerca de la educación superior china en el Occidente.

Palabras-clave: República Popular de China; educación superior; organización administrativa; sistemas de gestión; teorías organizacionales; administración universitaria

O desempenho das universidades: Compreender as organizações de ensino superior na China.

Resumo: O presente estudo explora os modelos de gestão utilizados em instituições de ensino superior em cinco províncias da República Popular da China (Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai e Xinjiang). Como o ensino superior na República Popular da China se expande e passa por grandes mudanças, uma análise detalhada das estruturas organizacionais de ensino superior chinês torna-se cada vez mais importante. Este estudo de caso incorporo entrevistas qualitativas com grupos de administradores universitários de instituições em cinco províncias do nordeste da China. Com base no trabalho de Birnbaum (1988), que lançou as bases para descrever modelos organizacionais nos Estados Unidos, os resultados apresentam quatro modelos de organização no contexto da China. Estes modelos são: Tião-Kuai Xitong (sistema vertical-horizontal), guanxi confucionista, autoritário e Dialético. O artigo explora a complexidade e diversidade que caracterizam o ensino superior chinês, uma vez que tem implicações importantes para a reforma educacional na China, bem como o desenvolvimento mais sofisticado de idéias em contexto sobre o ensino superior chinês no Ocidente.

Palavras-chave: República Popular da China; ensino superior administrativo; sistemas de gestão; teorias organizacionais; administração da universidade

Introduction

China has a rich and ancient history, but it is also changing rapidly as its economy expands and interactions with the international community increase (Gu, 2011; Guancai, 2009). While international interest in People's Republic of China (primarily referred to as China in this paper) is intensifying, many aspects of China's complex society continue to be poorly documented, especially in those areas outside of the more developed urban east (e.g. Beijing, Guangzhou, Nanjing, or Shanghai). In addition, Chinese higher education is in the midst of an ongoing series of reforms that have been transforming an increasingly dynamic system of colleges and universities (Lee & Pang, 2011; Mok, 2012; Onsman, 2012; Qingnian, Duanhong, & Hong, 2011; Wei, 2012; Wenbin, 2012; Zhang, Zhao, & Lei, 2012). Moreover, the organizational structure of institutions of higher education and the management practices used to govern those institutions have received little attention from researchers. Therefore, this study is intended to develop a more nuanced understanding of the organizational structures of postsecondary institutions in the five northwestern provinces, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shaanxi, and Xinjiang. (Please note that the term "province" is used throughout this paper in order to enhance the readability of the article. However, we recognize and wish to acknowledge that only three of the territorial units – Gansu, Qinghai, and Shaanxi – are provinces; the other two – Ningxia and Xinjiang – are officially recognized as autonomous regions.)

Data collection for this research project included seven group interviews with 57 university administrators aimed at exploring the current state of postsecondary educational management in universities throughout the northwest region of China. The data from these academic leaders indicate that there are several distinct approaches to higher education management, each drawn from different philosophical traditions within Chinese culture. It is important to emphasize that these management models coexist within a single institution and are viewed by administrators as being both complementary and in competition with one another. Similar approaches in the United States (Berger & Milem, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988) and Europe (Bush, 2001) have also identified the existence of multiple competing models in the complex organizational structure of modern universities. However, the models identified in this study – *Tiao-Kuai Xitong* (Vertical-Horizontal system), *Confucian Guanxi*, *Authoritarian*, and *Dialectical* – are uniquely Chinese and provide new insights into the ways in which postsecondary educational management is practiced in China.

Context

The five northwestern provinces of China (Shaanxi, Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia) each have their own distinct mixture of ethnic traditions. Shaanxi, for example, has been greatly influenced by Confucianism. Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi for several dynasties, was a political, economic and cultural center in ancient China, and is generally regarded as one of the most important cradles of ancient Chinese civilization (Mooney, Maudsley & Hatherly, 2005). The other four northwestern provinces are quite diverse; more than half of the inhabitants of Xinjiang and more than one-third of those in Qinghai and Ningxia are ethnic minorities—in contrast to the rest of the country as a whole in which only 8% of the overall population is comprised of ethnic minorities (Gustafsson & Shi, 2003).

While the region has a rich historical heritage, living conditions there can be harsh due to an underdeveloped economy and infrastructure in many parts of the region. Outside of Xi'an, the northwestern provinces have not been an economic priority within the centrally controlled political economy of the People's Republic of China (Dincer & Wang, 2011). Although higher education is well established in some cities that boast a variety of respected institutions, in general, the level of

education in this region is lower than in the rest of China and the gap between urban and rural education is significant (Jiang & Li, 2008; Wei, 2012). However, more recently the central government in China has begun to distribute additional resources to facilitate the growth of underdeveloped regions (Wang & Hu, 1999). In 1999, Jiang Zemin proposed a new development strategy for western China, called *xibu da kaifa* - great western development (Du, Shi, Xiao & Yang, 2000). One of the central government's priorities in the western development program is to improve funding and support for research facilities, technical training, and college education, as well as to introduce advanced and applied technological infrastructure (Lai, 2002; Mok, 2012; Wei, 2012).

The increased emphasis on expanding educational opportunities in northwest China coincides with a larger nation-wide effort to reform education at all levels, including higher education (Guancai, 2009; Mok, 2012; Onsman, 2012; Qingnian, Duanhong, & Hong, 2011; Wei, 2012; Wenbin, 2012; Zhang, Zhao, & Lei, 2012). Higher education has a long history in China which boasts many ancient universities, (Marginson, 2011; Onsman, 2012). However, access to higher education historically has been limited to cultural elites. In addition, higher education was dramatically and negatively impacted by Maoist policies that emphasized "proletarian" education (Zhong, 2003). Higher education began to receive greater attention and support with the implementation of broader reforms and the opening of China under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and 1980s. In 1995, higher education reforms began to be instituted, and the country moved away from a highly centralized system in which the state assumed almost all responsibility for decision-making and individual campuses lacked flexibility and autonomy (Mok, 2012; Zhang, Zhao, & Li, 2012). The overarching objective of these reforms was to strengthen the collaborative relationship between government, society and higher education institutions by creating a new system in which the state takes responsibility for overall planning and macro management while the institutions follow the national policies but have greater autonomy to make decisions on the micro level (Xianming, 2006; Zhang, Zhao & Lei, 2012). This shift in strategy also emphasized expanding access to higher education, modernizing teaching and learning, and diversifying the funding base. Some of the results of these reforms included the establishment of new institutions, the consolidation and mergers of existing colleges and universities (Chen, 2002; Qingnian, Duanhong, & Hong, 2011), the restructuring of disciplinary departments (Qian & Verhoeven, 2004), curricular reforms, increased access and improved facilities. The scale and speed of these changes over the last 15 years have created significant challenges as administrators and faculty members have struggled to keep pace with the changes (Onsman, 2012; Wenbin, 2012; Zhong, 2003).

While these reforms were instituted at a national level, the impact on the development of colleges and universities has been uneven across different regions and areas of the country, and the higher education sector in northwest China remains under-developed compared with the other five regions (Mok, 2012; Wei, 2012). For example, only six campuses in northwest China were among the 109 universities included in the central government-initiated "Project 211." Launched in 1995, the purpose of Project 211 is to identify the universities that are most ready to meet world-class standards for higher education and that are therefore worthy of increased investment from the central government (Li, Whalley, Zhang & Zhao, 2008; Zhang, Zhao, & Lei, 2012).

Even as the People's Republic of China has focused internally on educational development, including providing increased levels of funding, Chinese educators at all levels are interested in learning more about western models of educational leadership and management and how these models can be used to improve their own educational institutions (Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Militello & Berger, 2010; Onsman, 2012; Walker & Dimmock, 2000; Xu, 2011). On the other hand, westerners have evinced considerably less enthusiasm for learning about Chinese models of organization and education. However, given China's centuries old sustenance of its organizational

forms and culture and given the emergence of China as a significant source of global influence, there are significant benefits to be gained by delving into key aspects of Chinese society, particularly the rapidly evolving higher education sector.

Review of Literature/Conceptual Framework

This study focuses on organizational behavior and structure within a particular cultural context. Despite the fact that western models of organization may not directly apply to the Chinese context, western models nonetheless dominate the existing literature on organization in higher education. Therefore, a review of the assumptions that undergird this body of knowledge is a logical starting place for a study of this kind. Again, it is worth emphasizing that these organizational models do not exist in isolation, but instead multiple models coexist at a single institution at a single point in time and offer different lenses through which to view the organizational functioning of the higher education institution (Manning, 2013). There are a number of multi-dimensional models that have been developed to describe organizational behavior in American higher education. Baldridge, Curtis, Ecker, & Riley (1977) suggest that colleges and universities are best described as organized anarchies that can be understood through three alternative models of academic governance and decision-making in higher education. The *bureaucratic*, *collegial*, and *political* models represent different conceptualizations of organizational governance in higher education. Birnbaum (1988) builds upon this work by developing two additional models that describe how colleges work as organizations, the *anarchical* and *cybernetic* models. Birnbaum's seminal work uses campus vignettes, archetypes that describe how colleges function when viewed from the perspective of each model. This approach to understanding the organizational nature of higher education emphasizes that these models simultaneously coexist on any one campus. This work has captured the attention of scholars and practitioners alike and has spawned numerous other studies (e.g., Berger, 2000; Berger & Milem, 2000) that examine how the multiple models (or dimensions) impact campus processes and outcomes.

These conceptualizations of organization in higher education, like similar multi-dimensional models that have been used to describe educational organization in Europe (e.g., Bush, 2001) are culturally specific; while they may have applicability to other cultural contexts, more authentic knowledge is needed from local perspectives about the ways in which higher education is organized in other countries. This study builds on the work of American scholars (e.g., Birnbaum, 1988; Berger, 2000) on the multiple models of organization in higher education, and is based on the assumption that colleges and universities in other countries also have multiple models of organization that are unique to those cultures.

Care should be taken, however, when adapting models from one culture to another (Whetten, 2009) and this caution is particularly germane for attempts to use western knowledge to explain aspects of Chinese society (Bond, 1988). Chinese culture and its underlying assumptions and values differ significantly from what is found in the west (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). In fact, many of the dimensions of national culture are so markedly different from those of western societies that established methods for measuring these dimensions that have been developed in the west (Hofstede, 1980) are not particularly appropriate for describing Chinese culture (Bond, 1988; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Despite the long-standing recognition of the fundamental differences between Chinese and western cultures, little empirical evidence has been available in the west about how organization is conceptualized and practiced in China, or the unique forms of organization found within complex educational institutions such as universities. Some studies have focused on Chinese management within the business sector (e.g., Chen & Lee, 2010, Cheng, Chou & Farh,

2000; Farh & Cheng, 2000; Barney & Zhang, 2009; Gerhart, 2008; Redding, 1982; Tsui, Wang & Xin, 2006; Whetten, 2009). The authors of these studies emphasized the importance of understanding the unique historical and philosophical roots of management and organization in China. In particular, basic assumptions guiding organizational behavior and management are heavily influenced by both Confucian and Daoist philosophies that have shaped Chinese thought for centuries (Marginson, 2011; Onsman, 2012, Xu, 2011). These philosophical foundations have been interpreted and applied to the practical problems of organization by a number of influential thinkers ranging from the ancient writings of Mencius, Xunzi, and Sunzi (among others) and more recently by Chinese leaders such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping in the latter half of the twentieth century (Chen & Lee, 2010).

Given the unique and well-established cultural traditions within this ancient country, Chinese higher education needs to be understood in its own terms – and there is little, if any, literature published in the west on the organizational nature and functioning of higher education institutions in the People's Republic of China. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how colleges and universities in China work from the perspective of academic leaders in the northwest provinces.

Method

The data in this study come from a larger study conducted in the summer of 2006 that focused on the professional development needs of administrators in K-12 education and postsecondary institutions in northwest China. The qualitative design included seven group interviews with 57 university administrators focusing on postsecondary educational management in universities throughout this region of China. The participants were all current administrators occupying a wide range of positions (e.g. registrar, division and department directors, deans, vice-presidents, presidents and communist party officers) from 22 different campuses. Participants were invited to attend the group interviews by representatives of the Northwest Regional Education Training Center, and the interviews themselves were conducted on university campuses. The interviewees were invited to participate through email invitations to administrators who had previously attended training programs sponsored by the Northwest Regional Education Training Center. The first six interviews were conducted in each of the provincial capitals of the five northwestern provinces, including two in Xi'an (in Shaanxi province). The seventh was conducted as a form of member checking with a focus group of senior administrators from a single institution (the president, four deans and vice-presidents and one center director). The research team was composed of scholars from a Chinese university in the northwest region and academics from an American university. The interview protocols focused on organizational features of the participants' institutions as well as discussion around specific needs for professional training and development for in-service postsecondary educational leaders.

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin (simultaneously translated into English) and lasted anywhere from two to approximately three-and-a-half hours. As the researchers decided that recording the interviews could inhibit authentic and candid responses, data were instead documented through hand-written notes. One of the authors acted as the facilitator for the group interviews and three members of the research team acted as translators. At any given time, one researcher provided verbal translation, and the other two took notes in Chinese. Translation duties were rotated during the course of each group interview in order to limit the effects of exhaustion related to providing translation. In addition, at least one of the English speakers in the research team was taking notes in English at all times. Following the interviews, the notes were compared in detail and summaries were created. The researchers also collected data by observing campus life on the 11

campuses visited during the course of the study, including informal guided tours with a local administrator or faculty member and the chance to sit in on classes and administrative meetings. These observations provided an opportunity to triangulate the findings from the interviews.

Throughout data collection, a modified constant-comparative method of analysis was used to code data and look for recurring themes and patterns (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researchers focused on emic codes, but recognize that the findings are presented here using western terminology and language that are bounded by assumptions and structures of English language. However, the authors did use the final group interview as a form of member checking and also received constructive feedback from colleagues in China in order to help ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data analysis and subsequent reporting of findings.

There are clear limitations to our methodological approach. These limitations include the fact that the data were collected through Mandarin language interviews and then translated into English; many of the concepts may not translate easily or accurately. The sampling procedure relied on secondary contacts and relationships that were facilitated by third parties and the researchers assumption that the sample is representative may not be justified. The participants may have felt inhibited in sharing their insights with outsiders. Indeed, the participants appeared at times to be focused on trying to teach or illuminate the American scholars who were present at the interviews and this may have shaped the content and nature of some responses. In addition, the data were collected through written documentation rather than audio-taped for later transcription. However, multiple translators were used to improve the reliability of collection, translation, and interpretation of the data to insure the highest possible fidelity given the challenges of this type of cross-cultural work. Concerns about the limitations discussed above are offset by the value of obtaining data of this kind from key informants in higher education in areas of China that have received little attention from the west.

Findings

The findings from this study suggest four models of organization as described by the administrators who participated in the study. The models are: *Tiao-Kuai Xitong* (Vertical-Horizontal system), *Confucian Guanxi*, *Authoritarian*, and *Dialectical*. Each is presented in a manner that is intended to mirror Birnbaum's (1988) approach. The models are introduced with a short vignette that describes a particular campus, a device that is used to bring the concepts that define each model to life for the reader. This approach, characteristic of ethnographic qualitative research, is intended to provide examples and "highlight…episodic, complex, and ambivalent realities" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 119). While these case studies are based on visits to multiple campuses throughout China, each one is only loosely based on an actual campus and all incorporate elements that have been synthesized from multiple campuses. Readers should consider the cases as illustrative heuristics rather than descriptions of actual campuses. We believe that these vignettes will provide readers with little experience with higher education institutions in Northwest China, especially those in the west, a glimpse into some of the current trends in higher education in China. It is also important to emphasize that while the vignettes are intended to bring each model to life, this approach may obscure the fact that all four models simultaneously coexist on any one campus.

Tiao-Kuai Xitong (Vertical-Horizontal System)

Northwest Renmin Normal University (NRNU) was founded as a teacher's college in 1944. The institution has evolved from a small regional teacher training institute into a large comprehensive research university with a focus on education. It is now the largest university in its province and a regional leader throughout the five northwestern provinces of the People's Republic

of China. Much of the transformation from normal college to major university has occurred in the last 12 years as a result of a larger effort to reform higher education throughout China (Lee & Pang, 2011; Mok, 2012; Onsman, 2012; Qingnian, Duanhong, & Hong, 2011; Wei, 2012; Wenbin, 2012; Zhang, Zhao, & Lei, 2012). The university is comprised of 12 colleges across a wide variety of academic disciplines and professional fields. There are just over 2,400 faculty, more than 50% of whom have earned graduate degrees. NRNU is composed of two campuses – the older, traditional campus is in the heart of a large urban center. A brand new campus is located about 20 kilometers away at the northern edge of the city in a new suburban area that is rapidly expanding with many new apartments and professional buildings under construction or recently completed. The total student enrollment is nearly 40,000, including 15,000 undergraduates, almost 3,000 graduate students, and in excess of 20,000 students in distance learning programs.

NRNU is consistently ranked among the top five normal universities across the nation. The institution also hosts one of six regional education development centers which provides on-going professional development for educators throughout the northwest region of the People's Republic of China. While teacher education, its historical strength, remains the foundation of the university's reputation, the university is increasing its capacity to conduct scientific research. NRNU has also been taking advantage of the recent *xibu da kaifa* (great western development) policy initiative that the national government has implemented with the goal of strengthening economic and educational development in the western part of the nation (Du, Shi, Xiao & Yang, 2000). As the institution continues to grow and evolve administrative leaders have been actively engaged in responding to external mandates for reform while trying to take advantage of the influx of resources from the western development initiative and an increase in student enrollments.

Like most universities in China, this campus has a dual organizational structure – one strand, the operational administration, is headed by the President of NRNU and the other strand, the policy authority, is under the auspices of the Communist Party Chief for the campus. The arrangement was described by the Dean for the Faculty of Education: "We have two heads and two bodies – the administration and the Communist Party, each with its own body – but we are still one campus."

Tiao refers to vertical lines of authority and *kuai* refers to horizontal lines of authority, while *xitong* means "system". *Tiao* coordinates policy and strategy on the macro level, while *kuai* coordinates operational functions on the local level (Mertha, 2005). The *Tiao-Kuai Xitong* model has been described previously in western literature primarily in terms of how a loosely-coupled system functions, coordinating policy across various types of government organizations and agencies at the national, regional and local levels. However, at a more micro level, in this case a university campus and the various administrative sub-units within it, these same patterns of authority relations (*guanxi*) are manifested, though in more limited ways than what occurs at the broader policy level. As one administrator notes: "*Tiao* sets policy and maintains the policy while *kuai* implements and delivers on a day-to-day basis. *Tiao* navigates the direction while *kuai* gets us there."

Over time the relationship between *tiao* and *kuai* has shifted. Another senior administrator observed that:

> It used to be that the Party drove everything in order to assure that the university made appropriate contributions to society. Now it is more balanced because we must function in a manner that produces knowledge and students that are in line with international standards. This is not to say that *tiao* is less important now – but philosophy is more broadly practical now.

Hence, although *tiao* has traditionally driven *kuai*, recent reforms have given *kuai* increasing priority over its vertical counterpart, a process termed "making *tiao* serve *kuai*" (Mertha, 2005). At the broad policy level, this shift has allowed territorial governments more autonomy and has reduced

the influence of the centralized functional units. Similarly, administrators on university campuses have more independence and the Communist Party now plays a less intrusive role in the day-to-day management of an institution, including decisions about resource allocations. Nonetheless, vertical authority is still ever-present. As one campus official remarked: "The Party makes fewer decisions, but everyone is always aware that they are the moral guardians of the institution and all decisions are made with regard to this knowledge."

As noted above, within these dual administrative structures, *tiao* is represented by the Communist Party Administration and is led by the Party Secretary for the campus. In addition to supervising its own internal hierarchy, Communist Party officials are responsible for establishing policy and ensuring the "moral and ethical" coordination of campus activities in conformity with societal and Communist Party values. The Party also makes key administrative decisions related to government relations, resource acquisition, professional development and evaluation of personnel for promotion. The parallel organizational structure representing *kuai* is headed by the campus President who oversees most of the administrators and all academic personnel. Budget management and allocation, routine evaluation, and most internal administrative decisions are carried out by this more locally-focused administrative structure.

Kuai administration is much larger and more directly involved in the daily functioning of the campus, but *tiao* structure provides oversight and accountability at the policy level. This structural arrangement also results in ongoing negotiations between the formal hierarchical chain of command (*lingdao guanxi* – leadership relations) and the negotiations among managers (*yewu guanxi* – professional relations) that occur across administrative units. As one senior administrator noted "We must respect higher orders, but we must work with each other to figure out how best to make them work…we are rarely told how to do things, rather we are told what the outcome is that we must strive for." This administrative relationship plays out in numerous ways. The process of providing staff supervision, evaluation, and promotion provides an insightful example into the ways these structures relate to each other.

The direct supervision of all academic staff and administrative employees is conducted by the local university administration, as are all formal evaluations. However, the Communist Party structure has a parallel supervision and evaluation system as well, and both also provide professional development for staff. Local *kuai* managers focus on practical skill development (e.g. budgeting and supervision workshops for supervisors), while the Communist Party provides workshops related to "moral and ethical development." Actual decisions about promotion to senior leadership positions within the administrative side of the organization are made by Communist Party officials, and even lower level promotions are heavily influenced by the Party. Many respondents indicated that attendance at Communist Party-sponsored professional development activities counted much more heavily in promotion than did attendance at the more practical administrative offerings, or even than the results of formal administrative evaluations. So, while *kuai* drives the daily functioning of the campus, *tiao* exerts a powerful and ever-present influence on policy implementation, even though it is widely acknowledged that Communist Party officials on campus do little in the way of direct, formal supervision.

Members of the university administration recognize the trade-offs associated with this dual structure. The limits on autonomy and the lack of incentives to improve the functional aspects of their responsibilities (because of the emphasis on demonstrating "moral diligence over technical competence") that derive from the *Tiao-Kuai Xitong* are countered by the "safeguarding of collective interest" according to the campus President. However, almost all respondents recognize that a shift to a more balanced approach to organizational decision-making is occurring and will ultimately improve the quality of work at the institution.

Confucian Guanxi

Long West University (LWU), founded in 1909 during the emergence of the Republic of China, was designed to be a modern comprehensive university. The campus currently serves about 10,000 students, and the institution has long since outgrown the physical facilities. The campus infrastructure is aging, and buildings suffer from years of deferred maintenance. Despite the challenges of the physical campus, LWU remains a highly regarded university, although it has never lived up to the lofty aspirations of its founders who intended it to be among the most elite institutions in China, serving as what Americans might call a flagship campus for this region of the country. However, the level of investment in the campus never rose to expected levels and it is only within the last ten years that significant resources have begun to flow from Beijing to LWU. The campus itself is tucked away into a corner of the city, bounded on three sides by the large hills that descend into the valley with narrow streets winding up to the front of the campus from the large river below. Like most campuses in China, LWU is surrounded by walls with guarded gates behind which lies a large complex of buildings that make up a self-contained, specialized village composed of academic buildings, apartment-style residences for faculty and students, and other amenities such as laundry and markets that support the daily life of the academic citizenry.

Faculty and students alike appreciate recent upgrades to the campus, including new buildings and greatly improved technological infrastructure. Most students are grateful for the opportunity to attend university, although faculty often complain about sub-standard resources. Administrators express concern about the challenges associated with losing top faculty to other institutions (particularly those in the more highly developed urban east of People's Republic of China) and the difficulty in attracting new faculty. All constituents within the campus are concerned that too many of the faculty are home grown, having graduated from LWU before they began their teaching careers. As one administrator notes:

> It is good that we are family, we know each other and share a common history. But our relationships and ideas are limited – we only know us well. I have a travelled a few times for training in Beijing and there are so many ideas at the universities there. They have people from all over (within and outside of China) – it makes their ideas and connections more powerful.

Nonetheless, the homegrown almost clan-like nature of the campus community is a point of pride. There is a strong familial organizational culture that permeates campus life for students, faculty and administrators alike. As one department head observes, "this is my family, we have had few material resources, but our bonds are our strengths." All at LWU are proud of their commitment to community and recognize the collective sense of purpose that guides decision-making and action on campus. The Vice President for Research emphasizes that "we serve ourselves well because we understand each other so well. We honor our traditions." Members of this campus community believe that their institution remains more authentically Chinese than other institutions, with one administrator noting that "we haven't changed so much that we have lost our sense of who we are as Chinese scholars." They take pride in their sense of collective purpose despite the numerous disciplines and specializations that exist at the institution, and also in the fact that personal and professional development is seen as both an individual responsibility and a shared value. An administrator observed that "we all teach other, we have a responsibility to teach not only our students, but ourselves and each other; none of us knows everything, but together we have great knowledge."

From an administrative perspective, this approach shapes how decisions are made, resources are allocated, and responsibilities are fulfilled. The President explained campus decision-making in the following manner:

> No one person can make a decision in isolation of others – I am not only responsible for how good my decision is, but also for its effects on others. I cannot know the effects if I do not know them. I must be the one to make decisions and I expect that they will be honored, but I try to honor my people when making them.

The principles behind the above quotes reflect traditional values that have endured throughout the long history of China and have their roots in Confucian thought. To westerners, Confucianism is perhaps the most familiar of the cognitive frames used to describe Chinese organization; it guides many aspects of Chinese society, including how institutions of higher education are structured (Onsman, 2012; Marginson, 2011; Xu, 2011). While a full discussion of Confucianism is obviously not possible given the space limitations of this paper, the participants in this study emphasized that the following Confucian values heavily influence the nature of their work within their respective administrative domains: morality in action and self-cultivation, collectivism and inter-personal relationships, and humanism. The concept of Guanxi has been documented extensively. Guanxi emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relations, a sense of collectivism, and the delicateness of human networks (Xin & Pearce, 1996). The networks of relationships that characterize Guanxi are centered around an individual's closest family members and extend outwards to include coworkers and acquaintances (Park & Luo, 2001).

The participants noted that Confucius emphasized the importance of each individual's moral development as a collective as well as a personal responsibility. He believed that one's behavior should not be motivated by the search for profit, fame or status, but by the search for what is good and right (Loden, 2006). The distinction between *junzi* (the noble man) who pursues rightness and *xiaoren* (the small man) who seeks profit or self-interest is central in Confucian thought (Sheh, 2003). China is a collective society, and as such, the values of loyalty and trustworthiness within the context of cohesive interpersonal relationships are paramount; one can achieve success only by making an effort to help the others in one's relational world (Sheh, 2003).

These Confucian themes were evident throughout the interviews for this study. When participants in the final focus groups were asked about the influence of Confucianism, one senior vice-president observed that "it is hard to separate collective work like you find in universities from the values of Confucius. Confucius was an educator and administrator, what could be more appropriate?" However, a colleague of his noted that it would be too broad to call this "pure" "Confucianism." He observed that campuses function on the basis of "Confucian relationships" rather than "Confucian structure." The distinction between relationships and structure is important because Confucian philosophy, taken in its entirety, is much deeper and more comprehensive (and there are many variations – e.g., Neo-Confucianism) than the informal relational structures embedded throughout the more formal structure of the campus faculty and administrative ranks. The Confucian principles that guide organizational behavior at LWU and other campuses focus on how individuals should work with and relate to each other, regardless of the formal structure within the organization. For many of the participants this distinction is important because organizational structure has changed greatly over the past 2,500 years and many of the organizational mandates of Confucius and later Confucian scholars (such as Mencius and even Xunzi) are no longer in practice. Yet, the values that guide how individuals should work together remain as a constant, even as organizational structures change ever more rapidly as China continues to reform its systems and be increasingly influenced by non-Chinese ideas. Several participants in this study emphasized that maintaining the continuity of Confucian relations was more essential than ever given the dynamics of organizational change associated with the reforms of the last decade.

An administrator noted that Confucianism permeates all aspects of Chinese life, an observation that is consistent with extant literature. For example, Sheh (2003) asserts that Confucius focuses on the "self" as a "center of relationship" which is constantly evolving into an ever-expanding network of relationships. Confucianism also emphasizes that faithfulness and trustworthiness in relationships strengthens connections between individuals. This type of inter-personal relationship system is commonly called *guanxi* in China (Sheh, 2003). *Guanxi* differs from transactional relationships found in western countries and focuses on personal obligations to the members of one's network.

LWU administrators and faculty are proud of their internal *guanxi*, but also want to develop more robust external connections that could lead to improved access to material, symbolic and intellectual resources. The president noted that "we need to build on our internal solidarity so that we have stronger relationships with others outside the university…We have to move from *guanxi* to *guanxiwang* (networks of relationships); we need sets, or networks, of relationships beyond our own family." However, later in the conversation he worried "that we cannot lose our internal strength because we seek new friends and partners who may not respect who we already are." Like many universities in the dynamic environment of higher education in China, LWU is struggling to maintain a harmonious internal organizational culture that is steeped in tradition while responding to the mandates of change and greater connectivity that permeate the contemporary policy environment through the People's Republic of China.

Authoritarian

Western Technical Institute (WTI) is a specialized institution that focuses on training students in engineering and other technical fields. It was developed as a provincially-run institution in the early 1900s, but came under the auspices of the national ministry in 1998. The faculty and administration are eager to expand this previously small and under-developed institution into a larger and more modern university. WTI has grown rapidly and currently enrolls 16,000 students with nearly 1,500 faculty members in a range of fields, with continued heavy emphasis on engineering and technical fields. They have just moved from their old campus in the heart of the provincial capital into an expansive modern campus at the edge of the rapidly expanding city. New majors and fields of study have been added and many older faculty have been dismissed and replaced with younger faculty in new fields. Traditionally, faculty members have lived on-campus, but the new faculty typically live away from campus. Additionally, WTI has aggressively expanded its on-line offerings. These changes have been primarily driven by governmental intervention and administrative leaders who wish to respond positively to the mandates of education reform. The campus itself, although sparkling in the splendor of its newness, has yet to feel like home to its professional inhabitants. As one participant noted "it is very nice and exciting, but it lacks character. We have moved from our home into the dwellings of another." The president of the institution concurred, but emphasized, "we now have room for our expanding institution and our technical facilities are improved. We will settle in comfortably."

Despite dissatisfaction with changes by veteran faculty members, there was widespread acceptance that administrative leaders were entitled to their positions and that they should be respected. One mid-level manager noted that "the changes we have been going through would be even more difficult if we did not respect authority" and another remarked "we are all trying our best to respond to new administrators and new rules because we have a responsibility to do so." Subsequent changes have created numerous challenges, a situation made more difficult because of high turnover among institutional leaders. New administrators, many without academic backgrounds, have quickly come and gone. The core of the faculty, however, has remained largely

unchanged. One department chair described the tensions this way "the campus and the administrators have been imposed upon the faculty; neither knows us and we do not yet know them." Another administrator noted that many "faculty members resent the administrators and the new campus. They must comply with the mandates and the move, but they feel disenfranchised." Follow-up discussions with several faculty members during a tour of the new campus revealed some tensions, but more a sense of acceptance than resentment. As one said, "it is our job to teach, and hope those above us have wisdom to make policy."

The sentiment expressed above is consistent with traditional ideas about authoritarian relationships in Chinese society (Cheng, Chou, & Fahr, 2000). Authoritarianism builds on the Confucian ideal of five cardinal relationships; in particular, the father-son relationship is considered the ultimate social relationship. From this perspective, a father possesses absolute power and legitimacy and has authority over his children and all other family members (Cheng et al., 2000). The father-son relationship has been traditionally seen as a dichotomy between the father's authority and his son's submissive obedience. Following these beliefs, leadership within organizations has typically been equated with paternalism (Sheh, 2003). These authoritarian concepts also relate to legalistic theories of governance that are built on concepts related to the teachings of Xunzi and Hanfei in the third century B.C. that emphasize *shih* (power), *fa* (law) and *shu* (management strategies).

Respondents in this study reported on the ways in which they are expected to demonstrate respect for and follow the directives of supervisors and superiors. Within China's hierarchical society, the relationship between leader and subordinate involves a high degree of power distance (Hofstede & Bond, 1988); the leader asserts absolute authority and control over subordinates and demands unquestioning obedience from them. Hofstede and Bond also note that "the ideal leader in a culture in which power distances are small would be a resourceful democrat; on the other hand, the ideal leader in a culture in which power distances are large is a benevolent autocrat or *good father*" (p. 14). *Li-wei* (inspiring awe or fear) describes this type of paternalistic authoritarianism that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence. However, the rapid changes at LWI and the lack of long-standing connections between administrative leaders and their subordinates have emphasized the legalistic aspects of authoritarianism without providing enough time for benevolent relationships to develop.

Dialectical

High Desert University (HDU) is a relatively young institution in its current form, having been created out of the merger of four smaller colleges and universities in 1998. This merger was a direct result of the nation-wide effort to modernize and reform Chinese higher education. The campuses are in close physical proximity. Two are right next door to each other and if not for the difference in architecture could have passed for a single campus even when they were separate institutions; the others are within the same section of the medium-sized city that is located in a relatively remote area in the far northwestern corner of the People's Republic of China. The campuses are strikingly different in architectural style and quality of the buildings and grounds. The newest campus is modern and sparkles with new buildings and manicured grounds, while its three neighbors are clearly the poor relations with older buildings and minimal green space. One campus is barely in use and is in a state of disrepair and decay.

The physical dissimilarities reflect larger social tensions that have dominated this region of China. The newer campus and buildings represent the influx of ethnic Han into this region over the past 30 years, bringing with them resources to invest, while the older buildings and campuses represent the indigenous ethnic group that has been marginalized and underfunded. A senior campus official, a second generation resident who is ethnic Han, noted that "our university can be

seen as many contradictions with a mix of campuses, ethnic groups, ideologies, and purposes; yet, we are a symbol of China, many things all at once." Another observed that "our merged institution is better than any of the old ones by themselves because we now have many faces together as one." Not all interviewees are as satisfied with the merger. One indicated as much when he said "it still feels like we are different faculties pretending to be the same; we need to become one family with different personalities. We are not there yet." As a follow-up, a female colleague remarked that "change has come perhaps too quickly, but we could not stay the same either. So, now we must balance who we are and what we want to be and we must each stay unique while becoming a single unit."

The observations noted above represent a theme that was present in all interviews, but captured particularly well in the case of HDU. In addition to Confucianism, the dialectical orientation of Taoism is also a strong influence on organizational functioning in Chinese universities. Despite ethnic and regional tensions at play inside and outside of HDU, the respondents consistently discussed the need to be flexible and recognize that the principle of opposites is important for being able to understand how people and organizations function. As one official noted "it is good to have people from different campuses and cultures together, we will learn more from our differences together than apart." From this perspective, contradictions encountered in their work represent the limited understanding that comes when there is only a partial perception about some larger unity, and that complete understanding is only possible when the larger whole is understood. An organization should be structured so that "the middle path" is followed in order to avoid the extremes emanating from acting too rashly in response to what is usually only one-half of a picture or understanding. One respondent noted that this was consistent with the principle of *wei wu wei* (practicing active non-action or "swimming with the flow" as he noted) as a means for dealing with change. From this perspective, organizational action should be tempered to balance a number of different seemingly paradoxical tensions, including centralization/decentralization, top-down/bottom up decision-making, informal/formal structure, and long-term/short-term perspectives. This approach emphasizes the importance of consultation in order to have as many perspectives as possible on a problem before a decision is made.

While dialectical thinking and structure (even the *Tiao-Kuai Xitong* model represents a form of dialectic embodiment) were consistently espoused as the preferred approach to organizational decision-making and action, there were mixed reports about how well this operated in practice. Given its recent history (and such mergers have been common place throughout the latest era of comprehensive higher education reform), HDU is the most clear example of manifest tensions rather than harmonious balance that results from competing values and priorities in Chinese higher education. There is clearly tension at HDU among the underlying philosophical values inherent in a dialectical approach and the realities of realizing the benefits given the unequal power structures. One non-Han member of the administration commented that "harmony is more evident when you have power than when you do not." Many of the administrators from the predominantly non-Han campuses felt that they were being co-opted and absorbed into the Han-dominated institutions rather than integrated into a more balanced blending of institutions. One individual noted that "there is no middle path here – we must change to be more like them, they do not want to learn from or be like us." Hence, it is clear that a dialectical approach is desired in general, but is not necessarily being realized in practice.

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate the diversity and complexity in higher education in the northwest region of China. This diversity is manifested in terms of the changes that arise from the ongoing reform of higher education, including as campuses are created, merged, and restructured, the regional and cultural differences found in this region, and the influence of globalization and western ideas. The organizational models described in this article are lenses or different dimensions of a larger whole, with multiple models coexisting at the same institution. Just as we have recognized that the complex organizational forms in our society can be viewed through different lenses (Bolman & Deal, 2003) or understood through various metaphorical descriptions (Morgan, 1997), and that higher education in particular has its own set of organizational forms (e.g., Birnbaum, 1988; Berger & Milem, 2000), we must also recognize the organizational diversity within Chinese higher education. This diversity is not indicative of separate organizational forms, but rather on the differing organizational dimensions that exist concurrently within each university campus.

Just as Birnbaum (1988) used archetypal vignettes to bring the different models of "how colleges work" to life, the authors of this study have also presented vignettes that illustrate different management styles and organizational structures observed at the campuses visited during the course of data collection. The data are presented in this form to help readers gain a feel for higher education institutions in China, and use translated quotes from administrators from multiple institutions that represent and support the thematic organizational patterns identified in this article. While this format provides a useful heuristic (particularly for non-Chinese audiences that have not had much access to such descriptions), more research is needed to further develop these models and to confirm the authenticity of the findings and the extent to which they are generalizable to campuses in other regions of China.

While the Chinese models identified in this study could be compared to those found in western literature (such as Birnbaum's (1988) work), making direct comparisons does not seem to be particularly fruitful given the fundamental cultural differences embodied in Chinese and western universities (Wang, 2007). However, this study provides the means for international audiences to better understand the rapidly developing higher education system in the People's Republic of China as it becomes more connected to the global community of higher education. It also provides some new insights into the complexities of the relationship between traditional Chinese culture and the ways in which its modern organizations are developing.

Moreover, the results of this study inform our understanding about the ways in which Chinese public policy and education reform at the national level is impacting the organizational structure and functioning of college and university campuses. These effects were evident across all four models as the participants in the study discussed the nature of change as it related to how their campuses look and function. Examples of such changes include the ways in which the relationship between *tiao* and *kuai* are shifting, the growth of new campuses, the merger of existing campuses, and the influx of new ideas as China reforms its higher education system.

The resulting tensions regarding autonomy and identity were expressed by individuals at all the campuses represented in this study; future studies should focus on how China is managing rapid change and the on-going infusion of non-Chinese ideas into what will continue to be uniquely Chinese institutions. The situation has been further complicated by a complex higher education reform process involving decentralization, the reduction of bureaucracy, and a changing role of the government in education (Lee & Pang, 2011; Mok, 2012; Mok, 2005; Onsman, 2012; Qingnian, Duanhong, & Hong, 2011; Wei, 2012; Wenbin, 2012; Zhang, Zhao, & Lei, 2012). While some have pointed to the outside influences of globalization as the instigator for these changes, Mok (2003)

emphasizes that China has responded to globalization in ways that are complex and unique. No single study will be able to explain the evolving relationship between management styles and higher education governance in China; however, this study points out a number of unanswered questions and challenges. Chief among them is the co-existence of multiple models that interact in complex and, at times, seemingly contradictory ways.

The data from this study show that postsecondary educational leaders at Chinese campuses would like to gain a deeper understanding of western concepts around topics of management, leadership, and organization, including how Chinese higher education can benefit from this knowledge. However, at the same time, participants consistently articulated their belief that the Chinese themselves are best equipped to adapt such concepts in culturally appropriate ways. This observation has implications for the ways in which policy-makers in China and educational consultants from abroad approach organizational development in China. This caution appears in existing studies of educational leadership development in K-12 schools in China (e.g., Dimmock & Walker, 1998; Feng, 2003, 2006; Militello & Berger, 2010; Onsman, 2012) and is one that should be heeded as the exchange of ideas about leadership, management and organization in higher education proceeds between China and other nations, particularly the U.S. and western Europe.

Increasing numbers of educational scholars and leaders are returning to China after completing their graduate studies in Western countries (Onsman, 2012; Zweig, Changgui, & Rossen, 2004). The Chinese scholars of higher education leadership and organization who go overseas to pursue advanced studies typically receive a grounding in Western organizational theory, however it is unclear the extent to which that training is useful when they return to positions in Chinese universities. An increased emphasis on the impact of culture on higher education leadership and organization such as discussed in this paper would be beneficial for U.S. or U.K. master's and doctoral programs to adopt in order to provide their international students with a more flexible perspective from which to view higher education institutions in their own countries.

Scholars from outside China can benefit from this study as well, as it provides an opportunity for westerners to learn more about Chinese higher education, organizations principles, and the unique way that these interact in the Chinese context. Such exposure is timely given that China aspires to and has begun to play a more interactive and influential role in the world of higher education. In addition, this study is also a reminder of the inherent value in studying different approaches to organizing and managing higher education. A better understanding of Chinese approaches to higher education may help scholars and policy makers see new possibilities for higher education in their own national and cultural contexts. More studies of this type are needed, in China and throughout the world, in order to develop a richer set of understandings about the range of organizational approaches to higher education throughout the diverse and complex mosaic of higher education around the globe (Wang, 2007). Higher education research is challenged with profound asymmetries of knowledge: while the specifics of U.S. higher education systems are widely accessible, critical elements of developing and emergent higher education systems remain largely unknown (Teichler, 2005). The findings from this study contribute to reversing the existing imbalances of information that characterize current research on higher education. This contribution is particularly significant given the ongoing rapid expansion and development of higher education throughout the world.

The analysis presented in this study was grounded in Western multidimensional models of higher education leadership, management and organization, namely the work of Birnbaum (1988) and Berger (2000). These models successfully capture the complexities and challenges involved in higher education management in the context of North American society and culture. This study broadens our knowledge of the diverse array of organizational models that exist within and across

national boundaries by presenting new models that reflect how Chinese institutions "work", and provide evidence of the relationship between management styles and Chinese cultural traditions. Exploring the connections between leadership styles and cultural identity has been largely absent in Western literature and, therefore, these findings contribute by raising awareness about the cultural dimensions of colleges and universities as organizations.

Conclusion

Applying our understanding that organizational structures and behaviors can be viewed through multiple frames to a new cultural context is crucial if we are to have a nuanced understanding of how universities work in northwest China. Given that most of the existing knowledge available outside of China about Chinese higher education has been focused on universities in the urbanized east, this study provides a new perspective on higher education in a country of great cultural and geographic diversity. The models or frames identified in this study differ significantly from those that have been conceptualized by organizational theorists in the U.S. and western Europe. As Chinese post-secondary education continues to expand, including increasing its international links, understanding both the intersections and unique nature of different institutional models between Chinese and higher education institutions in other parts of the world is becoming increasingly important.

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About the Authors

Joseph B. Berger
University of Massachusetts Amherst
jbberger@educ.umass.edu

Joseph B. Berger, Ph.D. is a Professor of Education and Associate Dean for Research and Engagement in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst where he is also affiliated with the Center for International Education (CIE). Dr. Berger's scholarly expertise focuses on higher education leadership and policy, organizational development, and K-16 systems alignment and evaluation. Internationally, he has worked on projects in Afghanistan, Malawi, China, Russia and Palestine; and consulted with institutions in Colombia, Chile, Egypt, Qatar, and the Philippines.

Katherine E. Hudson
University of Massachusetts Amherst
khudson@educ.umass.edu

Katherine E. Hudson, Ed.D., is a Lecturer in the Department of Educational Policy, Research and Administration in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her work focuses on issues of organizational development and leadership in higher education, with a particular emphasis on how institutions approach organizational change. Other areas of interest and expertise include issues in higher education related to women, faculty development, and intracultural interactions. Time spent in South East Asia as a youth sparked an early and enduring interest in understanding cultures around the globe; her current passion for exploring higher education in international contexts is a natural extension of this lifelong pursuit. She has recently been active in projects in Palestine and Chile.

Gerardo Blanco Ramírez
University of Massachusetts Amherst
gerardo@educ.umass.edu

Gerardo Blanco Ramírez is a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Administration at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He incorporates critical and postcolonial perspectives to the study of higher education quality and internationalization. He has served as a consultant on qualitative research methods for non-governmental organizations from Peru and El Salvador and has worked as a practitioner in Mexico and the United States.

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