

The Role Identities of University Academic-Managers in a Changing Environment: A Chinese Perspective

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Abstract Academic-managers, working at the middle tiers of university management with considerable power and authority, play an increasingly important role in the planning and execution of key university activities. Little attention has been paid to Chinese academic-managers, leaving their work at Chinese universities under-explored. This article, framed by role identity, aims to capture how academic-managers at Chinese universities perceive and internalize their management roles in a dynamic environment fraught with market-led and managerial reforms. Synthesis and analysis of qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews, field notes, and documents reveal that the three prime role identities that are held by the academic-managers are the ‘manager’, the ‘scholar’, and the ‘bureaucrat’. Key issues that emerged from our study include the growing tensions that exist amongst the managerial, scholastic, and bureaucratic priorities of their roles. Furthermore, our collected data indicate that the perceived role identities are rooted in structural factors, including neo-liberal and new-managerial ideologies, the disciplinary community, and the officialistic culture embedded in the bureaucratic *danwei* tradition of Chinese universities.

Keywords Chinese academic-managers · Market-led and managerial reforms · Role identity · Qualitative case study

Introduction

The term academic-manager (Henkel 2000), manager-academic (Deem 1998), or middle manager (Thomas-Gregory 2014), being widely utilized in the area of academic profession, refers to the Deans, deputy Deans or Heads of Departments (HoDs), who constitute a middle-management stratum at universities temporarily or permanently. This article uses the concept of role identity to explore the ways in which Chinese academic-managers negotiate and internalize their management roles in a changing environment.

Since the 1980s, neo-liberalism and new managerialism have gained global significance and have caused unprecedented consequences in worldwide higher education (Waitere et al. 2011). On one hand, with the neo-liberal principle of converting public services into competitive markets (Rose 1999), universities are ‘empowered’ or ‘urged’ to act in the market and attain status or make profits through selling their ‘positional goods’ or knowledge goods (Marginson 2000). Universities have evolved from traditional ‘public sphere’ to ones that adhere to the market language of costs, profits, and competition. On the other hand, under the new managerial ideology of emphasizing the primacy of management above all other activities and monitoring employee performance in an auditable way (Deem and Brehony 2005), the traditional ‘collegial’ governance at universities has been gradually replaced with the new managerial governance, attempting to increase the effectiveness and efficacy of the universities (Todnem By

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et al. 2008). Altogether, this neo-liberal and new managerial discourse that combines free market with enhanced managerial technologies has been pervasive across the worldwide higher education institutions.

During the process of striving to achieve a dominant position in global competition, Chinese universities have also been closely involved in these neo-liberal and managerial reforms. Moreover, the ingrained tradition indicating universities as bureaucratic units (*danwei*) (Zhao 2006) rather than self-governing communities of scholars (Deem 1998) and the absence or weakness of western notion of collegiality have considerably facilitated the invasion of managerial discourse at Chinese universities. These new managerial regulatory institutions at Chinese universities have begun to increasingly force the middle and senior managers to take on new roles and engage with the reforms. Also, prior studies have pointed out that academic-managers as active agents could interpret their tasks and construct the meanings in different ways except for the minimum structural and conventional requirements of the roles (Johnson and Deem 2003; Deem 2004).

The real power of neo-liberal and new managerial ideologies in university academic-managers' identity formation has been continuously stressed by recent empirical research (e.g. Deem et al. 2007; Henkel 2000; Briggs 2007; Clegg and McAuley 2005; Smith 2002, 2005; Churchman 2006; Floyd 2012; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013). As has been shown, the fundamental shift in Chinese university management culture has led middle managers to change their management roles correspondingly. However, few studies have investigated into the changing role identities of Chinese academic-managers in the recent higher education reforms. Therefore, a more sophisticated perspective should look into how Chinese academic-managers make sense of their role identities structured by the reform discourse.

The research questions of this study are two: (1) How do Chinese academic-managers perceive their management roles? And (2) how do they construct their role identities in a changing environment? In order to answer the two questions, this paper starts with literature review of role identity theories and an evaluation of the changing environment of higher education in mainland China. Then, an outline of the research method of this study will be provided. Finally, detailed and synthesized qualitative data will be presented to explore and discuss how Chinese academic-managers construct their role identities.

Role Identity: The internalization of Roles

From a sociological perspective, identity theory is divided into three parts, namely, social identity, role identity, and personal identity (Turner 2013, p. 351). Given the

authors' intention to discuss Chinese academic-managers' management roles, the key concept of role identity will be utilized in this article. Castells (1997, p.6) defines role as "norms structured by the institutions and organizations of society" and makes a distinction between roles and identities by claiming that "identities organize the meaning, while roles organize the functions". Thus, role identity keeps being constructed based on the internalization of the organizational roles. McCall and Simmons (1978), two of the early originators of modern work on identity theory, have explained role identity as one's "imaginative view of himself as he likes to think of himself being and acting as an occupant" of a particular social position (McCall and Simmons 1978, p. 65). According to Stryker (2002), role identity refers to "the internalized meanings of a role or the set of expectations tied to a social position and guiding the attitudes and behaviors that individuals apply to themselves" (Burk and Stets 2009, p. 114).

It can be illustrated from these similar definitions that role identities are constructed through the process of individuation of the roles and this concept represents a close interaction between structure and agency (Stets and Burke 2000). With respect to the structure (role) side, we center on the cultural expectations and social behaviors tied to a role and talk about performing a role. In terms of the agency (identity) side, we concentrate on distinctive meanings that individuals bring to their roles after the identity-based negotiation, conflict, and contention. Based on this distinction, theorists have remarked that role identities have a conventional dimension (the role of identities) as well as an idiosyncratic dimension (the identity of the role) (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 2002).

In addition, theorists suggest that individuals typically claim multiple role identities, which are organized into a hierarchy within the self (Burk and Stets 2009, p. 40). McCall and Simmons (1978) identify two hierarchies of multiple role identities: a prominence hierarchy and a salience hierarchy. The former represents an ideal self that symbolizes individuals' desires for self and the latter reflects a situational self that responds to expectations of the roles. According to Ashforth (2001, p. 33), the dimensions of subjective importance (a prominence hierarchy) and situational relevance (a salience hierarchy) interact to determine the salience of a given role identity to an individual and that an identity will be most salient when the two dimensions are both high. With multiple role identities, individuals generally enact what is the most valuable or what is the most needed in the specific situation, and the enacted role identity in turn serves to guide their actions in the long term or short one.

A Changing Environment

The fundamental shift in Chinese university management culture reflects its evolution from a historically centralized government-led institution of higher education to a hybrid one that is simultaneously government-led, market-driven, and also managerially controlled. With the complicated interaction between Chinese tradition and the external effects derived from the global world, there are now three conflicting driving forces behind the current changing management systems at Chinese universities. First, under the influence of the Soviet model during the Mao period (Yang et al. 2007), a hierarchical, centralized, and well-organized infrastructure was built into the Chinese higher educational institutions (Agelasto and Adamson 1998, p. 31). During this era and continued into the late 1970s, Chinese universities had been operated as highly centralized, bureaucratic units (*danwei*) (Zhao 2006).

Secondly, with the increasing pressure resulting from modernization, economic openness, and global competition, the market force has been slowly but increasingly introduced into Chinese higher education (Mok 1996). The government's stance toward assimilating a more market-driven management system is best exemplified by a statement declaring that "[the] government must change its role from an educational provider with direct operational control to one where it plays an advisory role, by providing funding as well as legal and policy strategies amongst other services" (Chinese Communist Party Central Committee 1993). The withdrawal of the state from direct management of higher education gave rise to a quasi-market within higher education wherein universities, particularly those that were privately owned, could compete for the best students, faculty, and resources. More recently, the prevailing new managerialism discourse has encouraged Chinese government to impose increasingly strict regulations and policies for accountability while prioritizing the effectiveness and efficacy of its higher education institutions. The research findings by Li et al. (2013) indicate that "quasi-market competition" and "quantitative performance-based evaluation" have been established among the governance of Chinese higher education under the ideology of new managerialism. Thus, the management system at contemporary Chinese universities largely reflects its strong bureaucratic roots, emerging market trends, and a culture of enhanced managerial accountability.

This unique mixed management system with Chinese characteristics, provides the structural environment within which academic-managers must deal with their daily work. Embedded within this new environment, the university middle managers are progressively expected to take on more market or market-like activities and more managerial

responsibilities. Taken together, this evolving institutional culture has placed academic-managers in a position where they must construct or reconstruct their role identities.

Research Method

Identification of the Case and Interviewees

A qualitative case study approach was taken to acquire a deeper understanding of how Chinese academic-managers constructed or re-constructed their role identities within a changing institutional environment. The purposeful typical case sampling technique (Patton 2015, p. 236) was utilized to select a single case for this study. Data in this case study were obtained from multiple sources, including verbatim semi-structured interview transcripts, raw field notes, as well as documents. During interviews, the first author took notes to clarify or explain the interviewees' responses. In addition, several separate documents were also collected to obtain a more panoramic picture of the academic-managers' role identities. The official job descriptions of the middle management positions at the case university were classified as Document Type I and the university's official policies on implementing market-led and managerial reforms were classified as Document Type II.

University A was purposively selected as the typical case given its potentiality in providing rich and sufficient insights into how academic-managers internalize the market-led and managerial reforms when executing their managerial activities. Due to its uniqueness and strengths in the applied disciplines, such as traffic and transportation, communication and information, University A became one of the first universities selected into the 'National 211 Project'. National 211 Project, which has been initiated in 1995 by the Chinese Ministry of Education, has designated approximately 100 National Key Universities as the 211 Project institutions. The 211 Project aims to develop these institutions into world-class universities, and by which it is expected that the international reputation of Chinese higher education would be enhanced (Lai, 2009). Wrapped in the pace of decentralization of governance at Chinese universities (Li and Yang 2013), University A's procedural institutional autonomy in the areas of financial and academic matters has increased over recent decades. However, a more stringent accountability infrastructure that is determined and regulated by the central government has also been coming with such autonomy. Specifically, several market-led and new managerial reform measures focusing on faculty appointment/promotion, faculty salary, and faculty evaluation have taken place at University A (Document Type II). Meanwhile, these reforms have also

endowed the academic-managers at University A more substantive power and authority, elevating the importance of them at the institutional or departmental level (Document Type II).

The interviewees from different academic disciplines, ranging from the applied and engineering sciences, natural sciences, and social sciences, were incorporated into the data collection. Through convenience, opportunistic, and snowball sampling methods (Patton 2015, pp. 237–242), a total of 19 participants, including nine Deans (9 of 19, 47.37 %), eight deputy Deans (8 of 19, 42.1 %), and two HoDs (2 of 19, 10.53 %) from University A were interviewed. Four of them belonged to the discipline of social sciences, another three came from the natural sciences, and the remaining twelve were from the university's dominant applied sciences. In addition, because of the fact that the management positions at University A is male-and professor-dominated, only three female professors (3 of 19, 15.78 %) and two associate professor (2 of 19, 10.53 %) were interviewed. Detailed demographic information on the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants by the first author from October 2014 to November 2014. Interviews focused on eliciting academic-managers' narratives concerning their management roles, their responses to the market-led and new managerial

reforms, and their perceptions about their changing role identities caused by the reforms. All of the interviewees began their management career as a prestigious scholar and their management roles involved taking on duties related to the strategic and operational aspects of the Faculty or Department, including the curriculum designs, teaching quality, research output, faculty appointment/promotion, faculty evaluation, etc. (Document Type I). Nine of the interviewees consented to tape recording of the interviews, while the remaining participants only allowed the interviewer to take notes because of their concerns about job security. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in Mandarin and then translated into English for data analysis. In order to verify the accuracy, all interview transcripts were sent to the interviewees for checking and verification.

A systematic, qualitative data analysis was conducted in the following manner. First, content analysis on interview transcripts and field notes was conducted to identify recurring codes related to the participants' perceived role identities in specific contexts (such as "intellectual", "administrator", "expert"), as well as possible structural factors and forces that could contribute to the formation of those role identities. The open-ended codes (Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 223) emerging from the groundedness help us identify what codes that the interviewees have created to make sense of their management roles. Secondly, we used sensitizing concepts (Patton 2015, p. 545) to help turn the above codes into meaningful categories and affirm the authenticity and appropriateness of the inductive context

Table 1 Detailed demographic information on the interviewees

Code	Gender	Academic rank	Position	Discipline	Length of interview
A1	M	Associate prof.	Deputy dean	Applied sciences	2 h, tape-recording
A2	M	Associate prof.	HoD	Social sciences	1.5 h, tape-recording
A3	F	Professor	HoD	Social sciences	1 h, note-taking
A4	M	Professor	Dean	Social sciences	2 h, note-taking
A5	M	Professor	Dean	Applied sciences	1.5 h, note-taking
A6	M	Professor	Dean	Applied sciences	1 h, note-taking
A7	F	Professor	Deputy dean	Applied sciences	1.5 h, tape-recording
A8	M	Professor	Deputy dean	Natural sciences	1 h, note-taking
A9	M	Professor	Deputy dean	Natural sciences	2.5 h, tape-recording
A10	M	Professor	Dean	applied sciences	2 h, tape-recording
A11	M	Professor	Deputy dean	Social sciences	45mintues, note-taking
A12	M	Professor	Dean	Applied sciences	3 h, note-taking
A13	M	Professor	Deputy dean	Applied sciences	40 min, note-taking
A14	M	Professor	Deputy dean	Applied sciences	2 h, tape-recording
A15	M	Professor	Dean	Applied sciences	1.5 h, tape-recording
A16	M	Professor	Dean	Applied sciences	1.5 h, tape-recording
A17	M	Professor	Dean	Natural sciences	2 h, tape-recording
A18	M	Professor	Deputy dean	Applied sciences	1 h, note-taking
A19	F	Professor	Dean	Applied sciences	34 min, note-taking

analysis. Using the sensitizing concepts (such as new managerialism, disciplinary community, bureaucratic *danwei*) involved examining how these concepts are manifest and given meanings at a particular Chinese university setting and amongst a particular group of Chinese academic-managers. Lastly, “cross-case analysis” (Merriam 1998) was conducted by comparing and juxtaposing the resulting role identities categories within and between the nineteen cases.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the two authors developed the coding scheme independently, then compared and discussed similarities and differences of the coding scheme to reach “inter-coder agreement” (Cho 2008). The two authors took an iterative approach, working back and forth between the data and the classification systems, to verify and enhance the meaning and accuracy of the categories and also the placement of specific data within each of the categories. In addition, interviewees’ comments on the data interpretation were also taken into consideration to refine the final analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Academic-managers organize their work lives with the faculty and students in the institutional or departmental context and the senior university leaders to fulfill their managerial duties. In the process of fulfilling the requirements of stakeholders and accomplishing their jobs, they have developed or preserved multiple role identities that are organized into a hierarchy within the self.

A given individual or a collective actor may possess a plurality of identities (Castells 1997, p. 6) and that these multiple identities will in effect be a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation and social action. In the work of Castells (1997), a prime identity is defined as an identity that frames the others, which is self-sustaining across time and space. Inductive data analysis of our study reveals the three prime role identity categories below and uncovers the dynamic interaction and tensions amongst them. The multifaceted nature of academic-managers’ management roles is represented within the multiple prime role identities.

Multiple Role Identities

The ‘Manager’ Role Identity

The wide dispersal of neo-liberal and new managerial management technologies and practices has already established a regulatory regime within Chinese universities (Mok and Wang 2007). The ‘manager’ role identity was raised by all of the respondents, making it as most socially

appropriate and legitimately applicable to a given managerial situation. A range of related role identities emerged under the category of the ‘manager’ role identity, including a ‘facilitator’ in promoting the China Discipline Rankings (CDR) (A11); an ‘entrepreneur’ in seeking funding and resources (A3); and a ‘supervisor’ in monitoring and assessing faculty academic productivity (A13).

When asked about reflecting what has changed in respect of their management work, all interviewees claimed that the academic-manager was once regarded as a leading academic but now this role has become much more managerial. A typical response toward the top-down and managerial reforms is represented by academic-managers’ struggling for high positions on the CDR, organized by the Chinese Ministry of Education. The CDR assesses, evaluates, and ranks the various disciplines within Chinese universities (Document Type II). Since its inception in 2002, the CDR has completed three rounds of evaluations and rankings with the latest one in 2012 (Document Type II). Almost, all of the academic-managers, who are leading their faculty to compete for the CDR (A4, A5, A6, A11, A15), stated that the CDR is a key area of stress for them.

My daily work is mainly about preparing for the CDR. The ranking results will finally determine how much resources we can get from the government, how many benefits we can support for our faculty, and how competitive we are when recruiting students (A11, interview).

Although some academic-managers are soberly aware of the fact that the CDR has been simplified to counting the total number of publications and funding, regardless of whether it is related to the nature or development of the discipline, our research has identified that the priority areas for the CDR still provide strong framing for academic-managers’ management agendas.

It is wise and rewarding to follow what the CDR expects. At present, our priority areas are to publish more in high-impact scholarly journals, gain more funding granted by the Chinese government, and win more official competitive awards (A6, interview).

All of the interviewees mentioned the increasingly intensified managerial responsibilities, but only four of the nine Deans (A5, A6, A10, A12), four of the eight deputy Deans (A1, A11, A13, A18), and two of the HoDs (A2, A3) preferred to prioritize the ‘manager’ label as their prime role identity and made others as their subordinated role identities. They have made a conscious decision to be in a managerial position and intensify their efforts to work collaboratively and proactively within the various reforms. In this managerial role, they prioritize finances, accountability, and effectiveness of the institutions as key areas of their management work.

The perception about who I am and what I do has been under ongoing and dynamic construction these years. Now, as a manager for my college, I am devoted to playing the game about pursuing various performance indicators and league tables (A5, interview).

Much of the interviewee's job is to improve the institution's visibility (A5, field notes).

In sum, the dynamic environment encourages academic-managers to comply with "the external quality assurance regime, maximize their effectiveness in competing for research, evaluate whether it is cost-effective to respond to the policy initiatives promoted by the government" (Tapper and Palfreyman 2010, p. 101). To be more specific, the intensive managerial measures, such as "up-or-out" contract system and performance salary system, have been adopted by the majority of the academic-managers in different degrees at University A. For most other university faculties, the golden time under the protection of '*tiefan-wan*' (which means the lifetime job security) has passed away.

Last year, two associate professors in our institution were forced to transform their career tracks because of their under-performance during their contract period (A11, interview).

The 'Scholar' Role Identity

The 'scholar' role identity, by which academic-managers perceive themselves as a professor, scholar, or academic amid the disciplinary community is another prominent aspect of their role identities. Three of the nine Deans (A4, A16, A17) and four of the eight deputy Deans (A7, A8, A9, A14) revealed that they used the label, 'scholar', as their prime role identity and posed this stable and core role identity in the disciplinary community in spite of the increasing managerial pressures. The narrative accounts of this group of academic-managers emphasized that the powerful discipline identity that they have established by making contributions to the discipline before their management career is a far-reaching and fundamental factor in the way they make sense of themselves and the academic environment. Rather than being concerned with whether the institutions achieve a certain degree of visibility that is explicitly presented as a strategic goal of the university, they place more emphasis on whether the discipline to which they belong is developed in a discipline-focused manner.

Disciplinary community is not only the workplace where I work but also the birthplace where I come from (A4, interview).

I most appreciate my role as professor and intellectual, because teaching and research is my lifetime career rather than the administration. I am fully intended to return to being a professor at any time (A17, interview).

Unlike the institutional leaders who promote compliance and use the academic staff as instruments of change (Henkel 2000), these academic-managers (A4, A7, A9, A16, A17) hold a critical attitude toward the market-led and managerial reforms. In their views, the managerial practice is a double-edged sword. It helps promote the twin goals of efficiency and effectiveness at the expense of the intrinsic values of universities.

Currently, the faculty is under increasingly tight surveillance and is experiencing limited control over their academic lives...It is such a depressing and sad thing, and I do not think it is appropriate for this to happen at universities (A7, interview).

Although they were obliged to apply the managerial technologies, academic-managers who claimed 'scholar' as their prime role identity do not really accept the rhetoric of the reform discourse. The interviewees (A4, A16, A17) responded that some managerial pressures would be absorbed to a limited degree by the leaders themselves and would not be passed on to the academic staff in this case. Thus, a limited protective shield and a bounded space that is free of external interference would be offered to the academic staff in their institutions.

Our faculty should have the freedom to choose what to research and teach. Academic freedom is rather important to knowledge creation ... as a protector of my institution, I should try to alleviate the excessive surveillance caused by the reforms (A16, interview).

I have been guiding our faculty to establish some loosely-coupled disciplinary communities in our institution, wherein the faculty can ponder some pure research or teaching activities (A4, interview).

To conclude, the academic-managers who treasured 'scholar' as their 'substantive' identity generally exercise their intellectual leadership (Macfarlane 2011), rather than the managerial technologies or bureaucratic authority to conduct their management work. And much attention is insistently paid to the precious university traditions, such as academic freedom and autonomous disciplinary community. In addition, it is noteworthy that all three of the interviewees who were from the natural sciences defined 'scholar' as their prime role identity. By contrast, only three of the ten interviewees (30 %) from the applied science still regarded themselves as a 'scholar'. We

hypothesize that the academic-managers from natural sciences tend to keep their ‘substantive’ identity as a scholar intact because of the relative lack of access to the market. However, the applied sciences’ tight relationship with the market has assisted the academic-managers within this discipline to transform more readily into the ‘manager’ label.

The ‘Bureaucrat’ Role Identity

When invited to describe their role identities, two of the nine Deans (A15, A19) apparently preferred having the role identity of a ‘bureaucrat’. This self-identity could be interpreted as their understanding of their dominant position and power over other faculties and their duties to run the institution in a bureaucratic manner. The dual role identities as scholar or as manager are widely recognized in the literature on Western academic-managers (Henkel 2000; Deem 2004; Smith 2002, 2005). However, the ‘bureaucrat’ category is more unique to the Chinese context, as such institutions were once operated as a bureaucracy (*danwei*) after the establishment of Chinese modern higher education. More importantly, the officialistic culture embedded within the bureaucratic *danwei* tradition of Chinese universities has contributed significantly to the formation of academic-managers’ bureaucratic role identity.

According to Yu (2013), the influential political philosopher in contemporary China, the essential dominant relationship in Chinese society is a power-based officialistic regime, wherein the coercive power of the public officials can determine the allocation of resources and the “symbolic control” (Bernstein 2000) of the society. Within the university field, the officialistic regime is characterized as the structurally rooted power exceeding the academic power while senior administrators or academic-managers act as the public officials of the bureaucratic *danwei*, enjoying the bureaucratic authority that determines the resource allocation and symbolic control. With the ‘bureaucrat’ role identity, academic-managers will act as if they are structured in a political field, rather than the academy. This prime role identity is exemplified in the following interview transcripts and field notes.

Interviewer: In the second stage of our project, I also want to talk with the university faculty about their academic work, such as how they perceive their teaching and research activities.

Interviewee: So, why did you interview me? I think you should come to talk with the ordinary faculty, not me (A19, interview).

The hidden meaning of this short dialog exposes that this interviewee subconsciously views herself as a dominant,

superior class which is distinct from the other ordinary faculties in the institution (A19, field notes). Another interviewee (A15) who described himself as a university ‘official’, expressed that his utmost responsibility is to establish a social network with the government officials.

In China, you know, the government officials strongly control resource allocation. I am now in a position where I can get access to this powerful group, which is what I could not make when I was just a professor (A15, interview).

Although only two interviewees regarded directly the ‘bureaucrat’ role identity as their prime identity, the authors believe that almost all of the middle managers in powerful positions are not immune from this ‘bureaucrat’ role identity, especially if they wish to advance their management career. Moreover, the top-down market-led and managerial reforms have been compounded with the officialistic culture in China, which strengthens the bureaucracy at Chinese universities. Some of the interviewees (A4, A6, A9, A14) conveyed strong concerns about the bureaucratization of academic-managers and the university.

There is a popular saying at Chinese universities that “the higher the rank of the bureaucratic position you hold, the more prestigious academic reputation that you enjoy” (A4, interview).

The bureaucratization has brought about lots of negative consequences, such as overriding academic authority and weakening the faculty participation in decision-making (A9, interview).

Once upon a time, a Yangtze River Scholar, who means a rather distinguished professor in my subject, competed for the ‘Academician of the Chinese Academy’ with the Dean of a certain institution... ultimately the reputable professor failed and the powerful Dean won (A14, interview).

Role Identities in Tensions

Role identities are constructed during the process of navigating or managing a space containing complexities related to different dilemmatic positions (Burke and Stets 2009). Three different prime role identities—those of the ‘manager’, the ‘scholar’, and the ‘bureaucrat’—have shaped the responses of academic-managers toward the market-led and new managerial reforms. Dynamic interaction and tensions exist amongst these three prime role identities. The challenges of managing these competing interests were voiced by all of the interviewees in our study, which

resonate with the western researchers' (Henkel 2000, 2005; Deem 2004; Barry et al. 2006) claims about the growing tensions tied to the different role expectations.

I am occupied with endless meetings and mountains of paperwork. The time I can spare to conduct my own research is very limited and fragmented (A10, interview).

The greatest challenge for me is how to strike a balance between the management work and academic work (A8, interview).

However, for those (A2, A10, A13, A18) who want to advance their management career, there exists no absolute conflict between the different job priorities. Like their western counterparts (Hancock 2007; Floyd 2012), those academic-managers in China with a political promotion desire may prioritize their leadership, management, and administration over and above their other academic work and, in so doing, acquire new identities as a manager quickly and slowly relinquish their prior identity as an academician.

More importantly, an inherent value contradiction has existed among those three prime role identities, apart from the explicit time conflict. Academic-managers in China have placed themselves in a 'trilemma' arising from the above three prime identities. With regard to the tension between the 'manager' label and the 'scholar' label, academic-managers are governed by two sets of distinct and often competing expectations that are related to the 'managerial-utilitarian' and 'professional-normative' values (Deem et al. 2007). On one hand, academic-managers are expected to increase the responsiveness of the academic structure and facilitate to achieve its utilitarian missions. On the other hand, academic-managers' internal professional preference may perhaps insist upon the disciplinary norms. After negotiating with the conflicting values, ten of the nineteen academic-managers (52.63 %) in our study considered the 'manager' role identity as the most situationally relevant as well as the most subjectively important. By contrast, seven of the nineteen academic-managers (36.84 %) insisted the 'scholar' role identity as their fundamental and substantive identity. Obviously, the 'manager' role identity has been placed in a higher pecking order comparing with the 'scholar' one in this changing environment.

Furthermore, the planting of neo-liberal and new managerial seed into the soil of Chinese officialistic culture has also led to the enhancement of academic-managers' 'bureaucrat' role identity, which has inevitably impaired Chinese university development. Facing with the tensions, most of the academic-managers choose to concentrate on role identities that are more valued in the reward structure,

more accessible in resource support as well as more committed in their subjective importance (Burk and Stets 2009). Moreover, the far-reaching influence of Confucian traditions in Chinese society, which advocates the respect for official authority and avoidance of direct confrontation in the face of change (Hwang, 2001), also facilitates to alleviate obstacles when tackling these tensions.

Conclusion and Implications

This research contributes to the knowledge of role identities of the middle managers at Chinese contemporary universities and highlights the complex interplay between structure and agency. To be more specific, the neo-liberal and new managerial ideologies, the disciplinary community and the Chinese officialistic culture have proved to be the structural factors that influence the development of academic-managers' role identities. Meanwhile, the 'manager', the 'scholar', and the 'bureaucrat' role identities, working at the micro-level enacting social structure (Meyer and Hammerschmid 2006), are the results of adopting and internalizing these structural forces. Furthermore, these resulting prime role identities would guide academic-managers' attitudes and behaviors towards their management roles in practice.

Different management priorities are held by different prime role identities. The 'manager' role identity is legitimized by the reform discourse and the fact that academic-managers can maintain a rather large amount of support and rewards once they enact the 'manager' role (Thomas-Gregory 2014). Thus, the 'manager' category is placed in the highest level of role-identity salience by a certain group of academic-managers, who further integrate values related to economic rationality to the conventional dimension of the management role (Deem et al. 2007; Ashforth 2001; Stryker 2002). Conversely, for those who are not committed to the new managerial roles, the prominence hierarchy of their role identities depends on their internal preference and commitment to the traditional university as a community of scholars and the intrinsic rewards related to a more disciplined community (Deem et al. 2007; Burk and Stets 2009). Based on this calculation, they activate their ideal self (as a scholar) rather than a situational self (as a manager) and present an idiosyncratic dimension of their role (Ashforth 2001; Stryker 2002), functioning as protective agents of the traditional university culture. While activating the 'scholar' role identity, they express considerable concerns about the far-reaching effects of neo-liberal and new managerial reforms on the future of Chinese universities and higher education. Altogether, we illustrate a strong connection between academic-managers' attitudes and behaviors toward the reforms and their

perceptions of who they are through the analytical lens of role identity.

There are two key limitations in this study. The findings from a selected single case may illuminate some major dimensions in the context-specific settings but cannot be extensively generalized to other settings without examining key institutional differences. In addition, this article does not reflect the experiences of academic-managers from the humanities sciences because of lack of access to these subjects. Despite these limitations, at least two key implications can be drawn from our findings. First, the university academic-managers should reflect on their own role identities throughout the evolution of their management positions, be cognisant of the shifts and tensions within their role identities, the factors that influence the development of their identities, and seek strategies to cope with these tensions. Their role identities ultimately determine their interpretations about the external reforms and further guide the ways in which they execute their managerial duties. For academic-managers with strong 'manager' role identity, they strive to promote the institutions' short-term effectiveness in terms of academic publications, research funding and university rankings. But for those with strong professional role identity, they tend to focus on the institutions' long-term effectiveness in terms of research and teaching quality first, followed by knowledge creation, innovation and talents cultivating. The co-existence and merging of these competing role identities will benefit Chinese universities' effectiveness in different ways.

Secondly, greater attention should be paid to balancing the growing tensions that arise from the value conflicts among these diverse role identities. Several cognitive strategies, such as the personal re-negotiation of identity demands, cognitively decoupling or buffering identities, enacting identities in response to the needs of the moment, and prioritizing the identities in order of practical daily importance (Ashforth et al. 2008), could be used to cope with these conflicts. In sum, the extent to which academic-managers can live with these inherent contradictions and tensions of their role identities depends on the degree to which they carry out their agency.

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