

**Understanding Chinese Educational Leaders'
Conceptions of Learning and Leadership
in an International Education Context**

Ting Wang

B.A. (Shanghai), M. Ed. Leadership (Canberra)

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Abstract

This thesis presents an interpretative study of an Australian offshore education program in educational leadership conducted at Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province in China from 2002 to 2003. It is a study of the influence of international education on the conceptions of the participants in a particular context, where Chinese culture and Western cultures came into contact. The study is significant because it investigated a relatively new aspect of international education, offshore education, this time from the perspective of the participants. It explored the conceptions of learning and leadership brought by a group of Chinese educational leaders to the course and investigated the perceived influence of the course upon their conceptions and self-reported leadership practice. It employed a culturally sensitive approach which recognizes that a complex interaction between Chinese and Western cultures is occurring in the participants of this study.

This interpretative study was inspired by the phenomenographic approach.

Phenomenography is an approach to research that has been used to help understand the key aspects of the variations in the experiences of groups of people (Marton & Booth, 1997). The study examined the experiences and understandings about learning and leadership of Chinese leaders in an offshore program, a Master of Educational Leadership. The program was delivered in a flexible mode in three intensive teaching brackets of six subjects. The study employed a semi-structured and in-depth interview technique. Twenty participants were interviewed twice over a 12-month period. The study sought a better understanding of their conceptions by making a comparison between their perceptions prior to and after undertaking the course. Participants were from schools, universities and educational departments. Potential differences across the three sectors were also considered in the analysis.

The findings showed that most participants developed more complex understandings of learning and leadership throughout the course. Comparison of conceptions prior to and after the course indicated an expanded range of conceptions. There was reportedly a movement towards more complex and diversified perspectives. Prior to the course, participants reported comparatively traditional conceptions of learning and leadership in quite a limited range. Learning experience and exposure to Western educational ideas and practices seems to have led participants to reflect on their inherited assumptions and

to expand their conceptions. They generally increased their awareness of key aspects of variations in learning and leadership. This study identified a general shift from content/utilitarian-oriented learning conceptions to meaning/developmental-oriented conceptions after undertaking the course. There was also a shift from task/directive-orientated conceptions about leadership to motivation/collaborative-oriented leadership conceptions. Many participants reported that they expanded their leadership practice after the course. The findings also revealed some differences regarding conceptual and practice changes across the three sectors.

The study contributes to understanding of learning and leadership in an international education context. The learning and leadership conceptions and self-reported practices are context and culture dependent. The study illustrates the tensions between different cultural forces in the process of teaching and learning. The methodology which explores the subjective understandings of participants renders more complex understandings of intercultural processes than cross-cultural comparisons which have been predominant in the educational leadership field in the past. The results highlight the need for appreciation of local contexts in designing international programs. The discussion questions the universal applicability and transferability of Western ideas, and also highlights the importance of critical reflection and adaptation on the part of educational practitioners from non-Western cultures. It highlights the potential for growth of change in both providers and recipients of international education as a result of very different cultures and traditions coming into contact. Intercultural dialogue and integration of educational ideas and practices are likely to come about when East meets West in an open and reflective dialogue.

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