

From Administrative Responsibility to Political Core: A Systematic Review of the Party Organization Leadership System in Chinese Schools

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Abstract

This study aims to systematically review the academic research on the "Principal Responsibility System under the Leadership of Party Organizations" in primary and secondary schools in China since the issuance of the pivotal "Opinions" in 2022. Utilizing bibliometrics and content analysis, this paper screens and analyzes representative literature from core journals in the CNKI database (2020–2024). The review dissects the subject across five dimensions: conceptual connotation, historical institutional evolution, implementation challenges, optimization strategies, and empirical case studies. The study finds that while current literature predominantly focuses on normative policy interpretations, a deeper synthesis reveals a profound reconstruction of the dual governance logic—balancing "political rationality" and "administrative rationality." This review indicates that the new system represents not merely an administrative adjustment but a paradigm shift towards "organizational leadership." It provides a non-Western model of "political-embedded professionalism" for understanding how party politics integrates into educational bureaucracy, offering significant supplementary value to international educational governance theories.

Keywords

Educational governance; Principal responsibility system; School leadership; Dual governance logic; Education reform in china; Party organization leadership.

1. Introduction

In global education governance, the design of the school leadership system is the foundation of institutional efficiency. It is necessary to balance administrative power and the political or policy aspects, so that schools can be efficient and achieve the national education goals. China has the world's largest basic education system, and the evolution of its school governance model has its own uniqueness.

For decades, the "Principal Responsibility System" (PRS) has been the main management framework in Chinese primary and secondary schools. It highlights the core role of the principal in school management, decision-making, and resource allocation, just as "the principal acts as the chief executive officer" in the Western new public management movement. Under this system, efficiency, professional autonomy, and administrative convenience are given priority. However, with the deepening of the reform of the national governance system in the "new era", the relationship between the Party and the government is re-examined. Strengthening the Party's overall leadership over education and ensuring the socialist orientation of running schools have become new key points of reform.

In January 2022, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee issued the "Opinions (Trial Implementation) on Establishing a Principal Responsibility System Under the Leadership of the Party Organizations in Primary and Secondary Schools" (hereinafter referred to as the "Opinions") [1]. This document marks the transformation of the leadership system of basic education schools: from the principal responsibility system to a principal responsibility system under the leadership of the Party organizations. This is not only a transfer of power but also a reshaping of the school's decision-making mechanism, governance structure, and organizational logic. The "Opinions" clearly define the core position of the Party organizations in school leadership and require them to "set the direction, manage the overall situation, make decisions, lead the team, and ensure implementation".

In the international academic community, this systematic transformation provides a perspective for observing how the centralized and highly politically integrated education governance model in the modern context operates. It constitutes a challenge to the traditional Western political-administrative dichotomy. This study intends to systematically review the relevant research by domestic scholars after the introduction of policies, analyze the theoretical interpretations, historical origins, practical differences, and proposed strategies in the new system. This article is not simply a listing of literature, but to explore the potential changes in the governance logic to construct the "Chinese model" and contribute to the diversity of international educational leadership theories.

2. Methodology

In this study, a mixed method is used, combining bibliometrics with qualitative content analysis, so as to comprehensively and objectively show the current situation of research in this field.

2.1. Data Sources and Search Strategy

The study selected "China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI)" as the primary data source, as it is the most comprehensive database of academic resources in China. To ensure the relevance and authority of the literature, the search strategy employed a combination of keywords including "Party Organization Leadership," "Principal Responsibility System," "Primary and Secondary School Governance," and "Party-Administration Relations." Given that the "Opinions" were officially issued in January 2022, the search timeframe was set from 2020 to 2024. This range allows for the inclusion of studies during the policy preparation phase (2020–2021) as well as the immediate academic responses and empirical studies following the policy's implementation (2022–2024).

2.2. Literature Screening and Analysis

In order to ensure the academic depth and rigor of the literature review, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria are adopted. (1) Source Qlty: Only select papers published in CSSCI source journals and PKU core journals. This screening makes the reviewed literature come from the domestic high academic field. (2) Content Relev: Exclude non-academic literatures such as pure policy interpretations, promotional news, and general comments without theoretical depth. (3) Final Sel: Finally, 19 academic papers are selected as the research samples. These papers come from authoritative journals such as "Educational Research", "Journal of China Society of Education", and "Management in Primary and Secondary Schools".

2.3. Analytical Framework

Select the literature for in-depth reading. Conduct thematic analysis coding. There are 5 core dimensions in the review: integration of content, transformation of institutions, problems in implementation, strategies for improvement, and case studies.

3. Literature Review

PRSLPO academic discourse has 5 main theme streams, and there is a transformation from theory to practice.

3.1. Interpretation of System Connotation and Functional Positioning

The first research school defines the new system and distinguishes it from previous models. Scholars emphasize that the essence of the new system is to clarify the relationship between "leadership" and "management". Yang Chunping and Ke Meichun [2] point out that the leadership of the Party organization is "collective leadership" rather than micro-management of daily affairs, and the core operation mechanism is "democratic centralism", that is, a collective will is formed through full discussion and democratic consultation, and then decisions are made. This distinction is crucial, defining the Party organization as a strategic decision-maker, not an administrative executor.

This decision-making mechanism has similarities in structure with the Western "school board" model, which is the collective formulation of policies (School Board). However, Yang Chunping and Ke Meichun [2] point out that the core difference lies in teleology: the Chinese model focuses on aligning with the national will from the aspects of "political direction" and "ideological security", while the Western board focuses on financial supervision and stakeholder representation (stakeholder rep). Wang Yong [3] breaks down the characteristics of this system into 5 dimensions: leadership staffing, party-government division of labor, decision-making procedures, communication mechanisms, and institutional operation (organ op). Wang Yan [4] claims that this system has dual purposes: ensuring the unity of educational goals (cultivating talents) and national ideological security (political stability) (pol stabl). It is regarded as a fundamental institutional guarantee for modern Chinese educational governance capabilities (fund inst guar).

3.2. Analysis of Change From The Perspective of Historical Institutionalism

The second study applies historical institutionalism to understand the legitimacy and trajectory of reform. Xiulin and Zhang Xinping [5] trace the evolution of the school leadership system of the Communist Party of China over nearly a century, pointing out that the Party's core leadership did not come abruptly but is the result of historical necessity and long-term experience accumulation. Zhang Shuang [6] meticulously analyzes the institutional changes after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and finds 8 models such as "party committee system in schools", "revolutionary committee system" and then "president responsibility system". This fluctuation reflects China's continuous exploration when balancing policy integration and professional efficiency governance models. Xia Xuejie [7] divided this evolution into 4 stages. Since 2016, it has been the "stage of establishing the party committee leadership system", which means a shift from "administrative dominance" to "dominance of the party's political core". This view shows that the current reform is to correct the problem of "weakening of party leadership" during the period of rapid marketization.

3.3. Analysis of Practical Dilemmas in the Implementation Process

The theoretical design is relatively stable. However, scholars have publicly stated that there are "friction costs" in implementation. Bao Chuanyou [8] pointed out that there are cognitive misunderstandings at the grass-roots level. Many stakeholders mistakenly believe that the new system is "the main body has no autonomy" or just "separation of party and government". This dualistic thinking leads to resistance or passive implementation. Niu Nansen [9] said that there are structural defects in the operation mechanism, such as slow normative guidance, insufficient "double-capable" reserve cadres, and unclear boundaries between powers and responsibilities. Lu You and Liu Xiaonan [10] found the situation of "two layers of skin", that is,

the separation of Party building and teaching. They pointed out that some schools separate Party building and teaching, which makes the decision-making efficiency low. Xia Xinjun [7] also warned of potential governance crises. For example, overemphasizing political tasks and lacking professional respect may damage the school's professional ecology, or make the principal carry out utilitarian operations to demonstrate political loyalty and not focus on educational quality.

3.4. Theoretical Discussion on Optimization Paths and Improvement Strategies

To solve the problem, the academic community has proposed multi - dim opt strats.

Macro-Institutional Design: Zhang Shuang [6] suggests leveraging the "empowerment of laws," particularly "soft law" (guidelines, charters), to clarify the power list. A clear legal framework can define the boundaries between the Party organization's decision-making power and the principal's executive power.

Micro-Operation Mechanisms: Xia Xinjun [11] and Lu You and Liu Xiaonan [10] emphasize the need to improve the "Scientific Decision-Making System." They advocate for a state where "leadership and governance coexist" and "democracy and centralization coexist." This involves procedural protocols, such as the "Pre-meeting Communication" rule, to ensure consensus between the Party Secretary and the Principal before formal meetings.

Cultural Construction: Tang Lei [12] focuses on the soft power of governance. The study suggests that rigid institutional friction can be lubricated by strengthening ideological and political cohesion and creating a unified campus culture. By aligning the values of teachers with the school's mission, the tension between political and administrative logic can be mitigated.

3.5. Case Studies Based on Empirical Evidence

Empirical research is on the rise. Existing case studies provide insights into the operation of the system. Chen Sheli [13] uses the Shanghai pilot case to analyze the deployment of cadres and study how this international metropolis of Shanghai balances political requirements and the needs of educational innovation. Tang Lei [12] takes Sichuan Aoping Middle School as a case study. This study analyzes how rural schools rely on "Party building" to allocate resources and improve governance efficiency, showing the operation of the system in areas with limited resources. Case verification of the feasibility of the new system also provides replicable templates for other regions, combining high-level policies with grassroots realities.

3.6. Comprehensive Literature Analysis

Table 1 summarizes 19 key academic papers, classified according to the main research focuses, methods, and core arguments.

Table 1. Summary of key literature on the party organization leadership system (2020-2024)

	Author (s)	Year	Research Focus	Methodology	Key Arguments / Findings
1	Yang C, Ke M	2022	Concept Connotation	Theoretical Analysis	Defined "collective leadership" & "democratic centralism" as the core mechanism; differentiated it from specific management.
2	Wang Y (Yong)	2023	Basic Characteristics	Theoretical Analysis	Deconstructed the system into 5 dimensions: staffing, division of labor, decision-making, communication, operation.
3	Wang Y (Yan)	2024	Value Positioning	Theoretical Analysis	The system aligns educational goals with national ideological security; acts as a guarantee for governance modernization.
4	Gu X, Zhang X	2021	Historical Evolution	Historical Analysis	The establishment of the Party's leadership position is a historical necessity and summary of century-long experience.
5	Zhang S	2022	Modernization	Policy/ Historical	Analyzed 8 historical models; proposed using "soft law" to clarify power lists and empower governance.
6	Xia X	2022	Development Trends	Historical/ Theoretical	Categorized evolution into 4 stages; warned of crises like damaged professional ecology or utilitarianism.
7	Bao C	2024	Implementation	Theoretical Analysis	Identified cognitive misconceptions (e.g., "principal lacks autonomy") and emphasized rationalizing Party-Gov relations.
8	Niu N	2024	Policy Analysis	Policy Analysis	Highlighted operational issues: lagging norms, insufficient cadres, and cultural cognitive misunderstandings.
9	Lu Y, Liu X	2024	Problems & Suggestions	Theoretical Analysis	Pointed out the "Two Layers of Skin" problem and low efficiency; suggested perfecting scientific decision-making.
10	Xia X	2023	Professional Role	Theoretical Analysis	Discussed the transmutation of the principal's role from "Leader" to "Governor" under the new system.
11	Tang L	2023	Implementation	Case Study	Used Aoping Middle School (Sichuan) to show how ideological cohesion and culture reduce institutional friction.
12	Chen S	2020	Regional Status	Empirical/Case	Analyzed cadre staffing and policy feasibility using Shanghai pilot schools as a reference.
13	Dai R	2022	Implementation Logic	Theoretical Analysis	Discussed the complex relationships (Party-Gov, Power-Responsibility) that must be balanced during implementation.
14	Huang F	2024	Model & Effect	Theoretical Analysis	Analyzed the interaction between principal roles and Party organizations; examined selection mechanisms.
15	Qiang G, Xu Z	2022	Governance Structure	Historical/ Theoretical	Reviewed system evolution to respond to practical governance concerns in the "New Era."
16	Wang F	2023	Evolution Logic	Historical Institutionalism	Used "Path Dependence" and "Critical Node" theories to explain the logic of the system's evolution.
17	Xu Q	2024	Expert Opinion	Interview	Interviewed experts on the path of modernization in Shanghai's primary and secondary school governance.
18	Yu W	2022	Governance Path	Theoretical Analysis	Explored specific paths to promote modern school governance utilizing the PRSLPO framework.
19	Zhan W	2022	Power Boundaries	Theoretical Analysis	Discussed the critical issue of defining boundaries between Party leadership and administrative execution.

There is a structural imbalance in literature analysis: about 80% of the research focuses on theoretical interpretation, while the number of empirical studies on field investigations or specific cases is relatively small.

4. Further Discussion: Governance Reconstruction and Paradigm Transformation Under Dual Logic

Through literature review, this study holds that the integration of industry and education in vocational education is not only a technical adjustment of administrative power, but also a deep

institutional reconstruction and paradigm transformation with a unique "dual logic" in China's education governance system.

4.1. The Game and Integration of Political Rationality and Administrative Rationality

Existing literatures [6, 11] often mention "the relationship between the Party and the government". This study holds that this relationship is actually the tension between two different rationalities: "political rationality" (highlighted by the Party organization, focusing on correct political direction, ideological consolidation, educational equity, and social stability) and "administrative rationality" (highlighted by the principal, focusing on management efficiency, teaching quality, resource optimization, and academic performance). Western management theories often regard these two rationalities as conflicting, and also advocate "depoliticization" to achieve professional autonomy. However, the new Chinese system wants to construct a governance structure of "political embedding in professionalism". Literature analysis shows that successful implementation is not one rationality suppressing another. It depends on "cross appointment" (the party secretary and the president can hold positions in each other's party committees) and "party committee meeting decision-making system". In this model, political rationality is like a "navigation system" (keeping the ship on the right course), and administrative rationality is the "engine" (making the ship move forward quickly). This integration provides a possible alternative solution to the global education governance dilemma: balancing "value rationality" (the purpose of education) and "instrumental rationality" (efficiency).

4.2. The Paradigm Has Changed: From "Individual Heroism" To "Organizational Leadership and Joint Efforts"

The leadership theories in traditional schools, especially those influenced by Western discourses, often focus on "principal leadership" (such as directive leadership and transformational leadership). The "personal heroism" is hidden in this perspective, and the success of schools mostly relies on the charm and ability of an individual. However, the new system has fundamentally changed the paradigm of leadership. Hand over the final power to the party organization meeting, and the leadership model is transformed from "personal responsibility system" to "organizational leadership party committee system". This institutionalized collective leadership transformation is of great significance. It reduces the risks brought about by the ability or moral risks of individual leaders. Some scholars are worried that the complex process will reduce the decision-making efficiency, but in the long run, this "organizational leadership" focuses on the stability of the system, the consensus of democracy and the control of risks. It is a transcendence of the traditional bureaucratic management model and moves towards a more powerful grid governance structure.

5. Conclusion

This research review shows that the reaction of the Chinese academic community to the "Opinions" in 2022 was both rapid and diverse. The research pattern covers all aspects from concept definition, historical evolution to problem diagnosis and strategic construction. Scholars interpret the political logic of the policy, mention the necessity of the Party's leadership over ideological security, and also point out the difficulties in implementation such as ambiguous roles and operational friction. The consensus is that the new system is an important goal of educational governance innovation, and it is necessary to integrate policy logic with professional logic.

Table 1 shows that there is a structural imbalance in existing research. More than 80% of the research focuses on the theoretical aspects of normative policy texts. There is a lack of large-

scale quantitative research or longitudinal qualitative explorations of field investigations. In addition, current research also does not pay sufficient attention to the heterogeneity of schools. There is insufficient research on the differences between urban and rural areas and between elite schools and vocational schools.

From an international perspective, China's "Principal Responsibility System under Party Org Leadership" provides a unique reference for global education management. It shows how political parties set up structures in educational institutions in non-Western contexts to unify goals and mobilize resources. This attempt of "Politics Embedded in Profession" challenges the mainstream Western "politics-administration" dichotomy and promotes the diversification of global education governance theories. Future research needs to shift the focus from "Policy Intprt" to "Policy Evl". Three key directions are proposed: (1) Adopt a mixed method to evaluate the real impact of the new system on actual achievements; (2) Conduct ethnographic research to explore the micro-interaction mechanism; (3) Construct a theory to elaborate on the experience of the Chinese government in participating in international structural dialogues.

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