Organizational Culture Construction in the Process of Higher Education Reform: Inspired from Cultural Model Theory

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Abstract

The Cultural Model theory is a significant contemporary Western educational management theory school. It distinguishes itself markedly from traditional formal models and collegial models through its unique perspective. Its discourse on goal setting, organizational structure, relationship management, leadership styles, and other aspects within educational organizational management can provide a reflective lens and reference basis for current educational management practices in China. Addressing the practical problems emerging during China's ongoing higher education management reform process, and grounded in the universal laws of higher education development, the Cultural Model theory offers profound insights and valuable lessons for higher education reform.

Keywords

Cultural patterns, higher education, learning organizations.

1. Introduction

Tony Bush is a prominent representative figure in Western educational management research[1]. He has conducted long-term, in-depth studies on contemporary Western educational management theory and practice, enjoying high academic reputation. In his book Theories of Educational Management, he categorized numerous theoretical schools into six major models based on their distinct characteristics in four aspects: goals, structure, leadership, and environment. These models are: the Formal Models, the Collegial Models, the Political Models, the Subjective Models, the Ambiguity Models, and the Cultural Models. These six models represent different schools of educational management theory, each forming an integral part of educational management theory. The rich diversity of educational practice also necessitates a plurality of educational management methods. For a long time, academia has attempted to integrate key elements from these six theoretical models to establish a more systematic and comprehensive integrated model of educational management, striving to provide a holistic framework and rational conception for the management of educational organizations. The core idea of this conception is to flexibly apply different models during the educational management process according to varying management contents and contexts, allowing the models to adapt fluidly within the dynamic landscape of management practice to achieve optimal outcomes. Cultural Model theory reflects the tendency emerging in Western educational management since the 1990s towards emphasizing core values and beliefs, fostering organizational cohesion, and shaping organizational culture[2-3]. It represents an anti-traditional educational management model, embodying new trends and directions in Western educational management theory and practice as we entered the new century. Educational management, as a field of research and practice, exhibits differences across nations due to varying stages of educational development, ideologies, and educational philosophies. However, theory possesses characteristics of transcending culture, society, and space. It holds strong referential value when addressing common challenges in educational management practice, particularly in exploring the laws governing educational reform and development.

The Cultural Model theory in Western educational management is a framework that integrates a cultural perspective into the understanding and management of educational organizations(As shown in Table 1). It emphasizes that educational institutions are not merely mechanical administrative systems, but rather "cultural entities" constituted by shared values, symbols, rituals, and collective cognition. The development of this theory is deeply influenced by anthropology and sociology. Its core lies in understanding how educational institutions like schools achieve internal cohesion and external adaptability through cultural elements. The Cultural Model can be defined as: the significant influence that the ideas and value orientations held by individuals have on their own behavior and their perceptions of others' behavior. Norms formed among organizational members become organizational traditions, communicated and transmitted within the group, and reinforced through cultural symbols and rituals. The Cultural Model emphasizes the informalaspects of organizations rather than the official and formal factors. It focuses on the values, beliefs, and behavioral norms of individuals within the organization, and how individual perceptions combine with the recognized perceptions of the organization. A key characteristic of the Cultural Model is its emphasis on the values and beliefs of organizational members. It must be noted, however, that these values and beliefs are sometimes latent and unexpressed within members. Furthermore, in large organizations with diverse goals (such as universities and colleges), the differing values and beliefs of members lead to multiple organizational cultures rather than a single, unified one. Groups compete and remain distinct; teachers often demonstrate loyalty to their own group, which possesses its own characteristics. Frequent interaction, even outside work hours, fosters shared group perspectives on teaching methods, discipline, curriculum, etc.

2. Research Methods

2.1. School Positioning and Goal Setting Should Highlight Cultural Identity and Value Consensus

Table1 Comparative Analysis Table of Educational Management Models

Management Model	Core Characteristics	Organizational Structure	Decision Mechanism	Human Nature Assumption	Relevance in Chinese HE
Formal Model	Hierarchical authority, Rule-oriented	Vertical hierarchy	Top-down directives	Passive executor	Administrative dominance in resource allocation (Strong)
Collegial Model	Professional consensus, Equal participation	Flattened committees	Collective consultation	Professional autonomous body	Weakened academic committees (Weak)
Political Model	Power contest, Interest competition	Multiple parallel committees	Negotiation & compromise	Interest-driven actor	Inter-institutional resource competition (Medium)

Management Model	Core Characteristics	Organizational Structure	Decision Mechanism	Human Nature Assumption	Relevance in Chinese HE
Subjective Model	Individual cognition, Psychological experience	Loose networks	Contextual judgment	Emotional being	Insufficient teacher development focus (Weak)
Ambiguity Model	Fluid goals, Flexible adaptation	Ad-hoc task forces	Incremental adjustment	Bounded rational actor	Suitable for transitional reforms (Strong)
Cultural Model	Values cohesion, Symbolic rituals	Learning networks	Vision-driven	Value identifier	Crucial for distinctive development (Urgent need)

Regarding organizational goals, the Cultural Model posits that goals are an expression of organizational culture. How goals are articulated and the degree of member commitment to them reflect the role of culture, which in turn reinforces the organization's cultural beliefs. Clark explicitly stated: "A clear statement of the goals of the school, college, or its departments will help form a shared understanding and values[4-6]. Well-articulated goals will help engage the interest of every organizational member. Such goals will help create a strong culture." A school's culture can be expressed through its goals; the articulation of goals and the commitment demonstrated by members' actions reinforce the organization's values and beliefs(As shown in figure 1). The establishment of institutional positioning and development goals plays a crucial role in China's higher education reform. Institutional positioning is a strategic choice for universities to identify their niche in meeting societal needs. It is key to a university's comprehensive and sustainable development and fundamental to forming its distinctive characteristics. Existing application-oriented universities mainly evolved from local ordinary undergraduate institutions and have been significantly influenced by the traditional research university model. The prevalent academic evaluation orientation, the blind pursuit of comprehensive disciplines, and overly academic positioning hinder these institutions from finding their appropriate development path and achieving distinctive growth. The reality of higher education resource allocation subtly encourages application-oriented universities towards academic positioning. Building a high-quality university requires sustained and substantial external resource investment. Under the "rational choice" assumption, institutions may make decisions perceived as most beneficial for acquiring development resources.

To explain the influencing factors of higher education system operation, Scholar Burton proposed the "triangle coordination model" involving state authority, academic oligarchy, and the market[7-8]. For a long time, administrative power has been the primary factor influencing resource allocation in Chinese higher education, with governments and educational administrative bodies dominating distribution through administrative means. Research universities, positioned at the pinnacle of China's higher education pyramid, have received substantial fiscal and policy resources over their long development. The vast number of application-oriented universities, seeking government resources, often chooses an academic

development path similar to research universities. Influenced by traditional Chinese values, some application-oriented universities set unrealistic hierarchical positioning goals, blindly pursuing institutional upgrading and promotion[9-10]. Within China's higher education system, different institutional levels entail different functions, tasks, and resource access. Blindly emulating traditional research universities fails to demonstrate a strong, cohesive organizational culture. This not only leads to homogenization in positioning, causing loss of institutional characteristics and advantages, but also traps application-oriented universities in developmental dilemmas.

Drawing on the Cultural Model theory, developing distinctive institutional philosophy and goals could adopt the "Inheritance + Consensus-building + Growth" approach: "Inheritance" means referencing the institution's past philosophy and goals, especially for historically rich universities whose past positioning and characteristics often embody clear objectives and frameworks. "Consensus-building" (averaging) involves inviting representatives such as teachers and scholars to propose their ideas during the goal-setting process; the institution then analyzes these inputs to identify feasible elements. "Growth" signifies that institutional philosophy and goals should be established at a forward-looking, developmental level, clearly defining the institution's future direction based on its current reality.
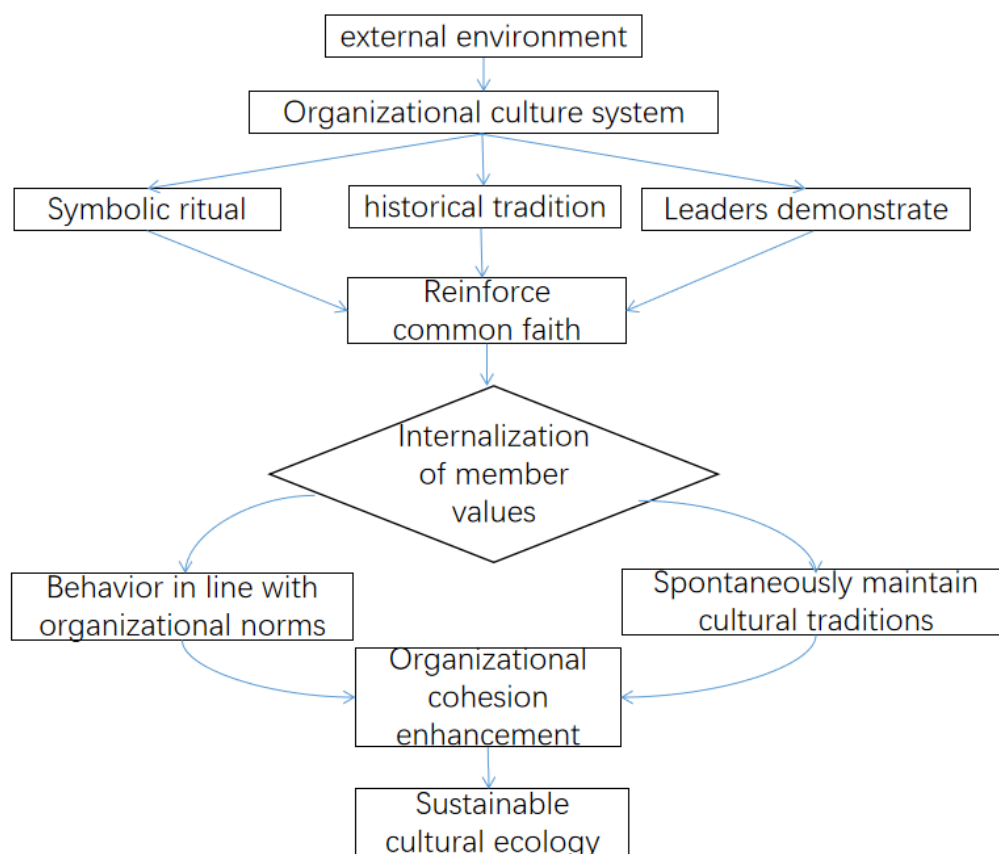

Figure 1: The Mechanism of Internalization of Organizational Values Driven by Cultural Patterns

2.2. Organizational Structure Design and Cultural Shaping to Build a Learning Organization

The Cultural Model theory views structure as the carrier or physical manifestation of organizational culture. The roles and relationships established within an organization express its core values and beliefs. Concerning the organizational environment, the Cultural Model sees the external environment as a source of values and beliefs that combine to form the school's organizational culture. Motivating staff through values is predicated on consensus. When a

member's behavior aligns with organizational values, it is reinforced. When it conflicts, friction arises, ultimately leading the organizational values to reshape the individual's values. Through repeated reinforcement, these shared values become core elements of the individual's identity, exerting lasting motivational force. In China's current higher education reform, institutional culture and organizational structure design indeed face profound growing pains stemming from the tension between traditional academic communities and modern management systems, as well as the value restructuring demands brought by the globalized education market.

(1) The Cultural Model theory proposes that educational management is most suited for building a learning organizational culture. From the perspective of organizational structure design, different management models require different optimal structures: For the Formal model, a vertical, hierarchical structure is most effective; for the Collegial model, the best structure facilitates staff participation, providing a collegial foundation for policy formation; the Political model ideally utilizes committee structures as arenas for academic and administrative staff to debate, vent conflicts, and compete to justify their priorities, achieving balanced mechanisms and policies through mutual constraint. Different models assume different human natures and behaviors, leading to varying implementation strategies and effectiveness. The Cultural Model strongly advocates building learning organizations, extending management into the spiritual realm, using culture as a key management tool and vehicle, establishing shared visions, and inspiring self-motivated behavior among members.

(2) The function of values is determined by their intrinsic nature. This manifests in several ways: Firstly, an assimilation effect– organizational values can assimilate individual values. Secondly, an activation effect– values can generate and sustain human behavior. Thirdly, a cohesive effect– every organization possesses unique values; its establishment and sustenance depend on the integration and alignment of member values. Recognized values act as intermediaries for social interaction, reference points for evaluating reality, and convergent goals for members, forming an intangible force. Fourthly, a directional effect– in management activities, the establishment of decision-making goals most centrally reflects the guiding role of values for educational decision-makers, signifying what they deem most important and what actions should be taken. Goals represent the desired future states. An orientation becomes a target only when it is perceived as valuable and capable of satisfying needs. What kind of values exist determines what kind of goals emerge. The comprehensive management model based on values is characterized by integrating deep-level needs with surface-level needs. Motivating organizational members relies not only on individual personality dynamics but also on the dynamics of the organizational environment.

(3) The Cultural Model theory holds that the external environment is the source of the values and beliefs that form the organizational culture. Since organizations are open rather than closed systems, the survival and development of schools increasingly depend on their ability to successfully interact with the external environment. The typical expression of culture occurs through rituals and ceremonies that support and extol recognized beliefs and norms. Schools are rich in cultural symbols and expressions, such as assemblies, award ceremonies, and dedication rituals in privately funded institutions. Rituals are a vital component of the Cultural Model, and cultural symbols are central to the process of forming shared conceptions.

2.3. Management Leadership Styles Emphasize People-Oriented Approaches

Regarding leadership styles, the Cultural Model posits that organizational leaders bear significant responsibility for the development and reinforcement of culture. Leaders must articulate the organization's core values and beliefs to both internal staff and external stakeholders, utilizing this as a crucial means to sustain organizational culture and enhance management effectiveness. In the reform of China's higher education internal management systems, the dominant theme for a considerable period has been "decentralization" – including

expanding university presidents' autonomy, rights to independently hire faculty and staff, and autonomy in internal resource allocation. These decentralization measures are entirely necessary to address the stifling effects of the planned economy era, where excessive government control left institutions lacking vitality. However, during the internal management reform process, numerous operational schemes emerged that were unsuitable or incompatible with the nature and characteristics of educational management and teacher labor. These problems are particularly evident in the misinterpretation of the principal accountability system, the oversimplified link between teacher contributions and remuneration, and the over-reliance on material incentives to motivate staff.

(1) The integration of implementing the principal accountability system with democratic staff participation in school management. According to modern management theory, personal accountability in modern social organizations does not imply that managers can act arbitrarily or autocratically. Presidents operating under the principal accountability system are no exception. This means presidents must exercise decision-making and command authority resolutely while skillfully leveraging the collective wisdom of other administrators and the teaching body, achieving centralized and unified management based on broad democratic foundations. The extent and effectiveness of staff participation depend on their willingness to participate and their available time. In small-scale educational institutions, where members lack sufficient interaction time, adopting a collegial model is difficult, making them more receptive to vertical leadership styles. In larger institutions, teachers enjoy greater time flexibility, providing the prerequisite for applying the political and collegial models. If members exhibit indifference towards participation, this reflects the "fluid participation" characteristic emphasized by the Ambiguity model.

(2) The rationality and supporting mechanisms of school labor distribution system reforms. In reforming school compensation systems, the principle of combining material and spiritual incentives should be upheld. Alongside a primarily material incentive-based structural salary system, complementary spiritual reward systems like teaching awards and honor systems should be established. In current school management practice, diligent, dedicated, responsible, and conscientious staff should be granted various forms of spiritual recognition, such as honorary titles, public commendation of their achievements and spirit, and ample respect in daily work. A campus atmosphere should be fostered that cultivates strong professional commitment, a sense of lofty mission, and a spirit of dedication. Thus, motivating staff labor should not be confined solely to material causes but should, once basic material needs are met, rely on spiritual forces to elevate the quality of teachers' work.

(3) The Cultural Model theory states that organizational leaders bear primary responsibility for consolidating and developing culture. The president's values and beliefs are grounded in years of successful professional practice. As experienced educational managers, they should possess a keen sensitivity to the specific nature of their management objects. Therefore, educational managers should embody cultural distinctiveness in their management, emphasizing and advocating for a people-oriented organizational culture. Considering the Cultural Model's positioning of leadership responsibility as "consolidating and developing the coalesced culture," the principal is the creator of the school's culture. Given the management powers endowed by the current principal accountability system, principals can, while complying with national education laws and policies, formulate development goals and implementation plans suited to the school's reality, choose management methods and specific strategies, and assume comprehensive responsibility. An ideal principal should be one who relentlessly pursues their educational ideals and philosophy, possessing a unique management style. A distinctive principal is key to developing a school's unique characteristics and creating a special campus culture. The developmental level of the principal often determines the developmental level of the school itself.

(4) Organizations need to manage the relationship between informal and formal groups. Informal groups are temporary collectives formed spontaneously by organizational members due to shared interests, hobbies, beliefs, or values. Unlike formal organizations, they lack clear division of responsibilities and power distribution; they are sustained primarily by sentiment. Precisely because of this non-rational element of emotion, informal groups often carry significant weight. Some educational managers fail to recognize the existence or legitimacy of informal groups among teachers, attempting to forcibly incorporate them into the formal structure or disband them. This typically results in emotional confrontation between management and staff and rigid interpersonal relationships. We argue that as long as spiritual needs are reasonable and do not disrupt educational activities, they should be accommodated. Practice shows that many successful principals enthusiastically organize activities to enrich teachers' spiritual lives precisely because they recognize the substantial returns on this "spiritual investment."

3. Conclusion

In summary, the study and practice of higher education management reveal a dynamic developmental process. In Chinese universities, formal models, democratic models, and others exist and exert influence to varying degrees. As higher education reform deepens and progresses, reliance on a single model can no longer meet practical needs. The inherent diversity within Chinese higher education itself dictates that diversified management models are an inevitable requirement for its development. Facing the reality of multi-level, multi-type, multi-form, and multi-agent higher education, as schools establish new mechanisms to engage with society, they should flexibly and comprehensively draw upon the rational elements of various educational management models, maximizing their strengths and mitigating their limitations. Only then can the principle of "using stones from other hills to polish one's jade" be truly realized, playing a positive role in China's higher education and its management(As shown in Table 2). For practitioners of educational management, it is crucial to develop a mindset of pluralism and contingency, enabling them to select the most suitable theory for different problems and situations. Any management theory, in principle, is neither inherently good nor bad; it is a unity of merits and shortcomings. But when applied to specific practices, its relative strengths and weaknesses become clear. No single management theory is sufficient to guide practice alone; the effectiveness of each model varies depending on the management context. What managers can do is choose the model most suited to their organization's characteristics and employ diverse, flexible methods to enhance management efficiency.

Acknowledgments

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Table 2 Application Pathways of Cultural Model Theory in Chinese Higher Education Reform

Problem Domain	Reality in Chinese HE	Core Insight from Cultural Model	Practical Application Suggestions	Expected Outcomes
Goal Positioning	Academic homogenization of applied universities (e.g., blind establishment of PhD programs)	Goals must carry cultural DNA (Clark's Goal-Culture Theory)	"Heritage + Consensus + Growth" Positioning: - Inherit historical traditions - Faculty participation in goal-setting - Dynamic development pathway upgrading	• Distinctive institution rate •Distinctive institution rate ↑30% • Resource mismatch rate ↓40%
Organizational Structure	Rigid administrative hierarchy (e.g., cross-departmental collaboration barriers)	Build learning organization culture (Values assimilation mechanism)	Three-Track Structure Design: - Vertical: Responsibility lists (university-department) - Horizontal: Interdisciplinary platforms - Networked: Virtual teaching-research communities	• Decision efficiency ↑50% • Faculty innovation engagement ↑65%
Leadership Approach	Overreliance on material incentives (e.g., paper-counting reward systems)	Leaders as cultural custodians (Symbolic ritual builders)	Dual-Channel Incentive System: Material layer: Performance-based evaluation Spiritual layer: - Teaching belief medals - Cultural inheritance ceremonies	• Faculty burnout rate ↓35% •Organizational commitment ↑55%

Problem Domain	Reality in Chinese HE	Core Insight from Cultural Model	Practical Application Suggestions	Expected Outcomes
			- Empowerment of informal groups	