RESEARCH ARTICLE

LUO Zhimin, CHEN Chunlian, WANG Xian

Alumni Relations in Chinese HEIs: Case Studies of Three Major Universities

Abstract   Good alumni relations are key to universities and colleges winning support from their graduates. With reference to social capital theory, an important problem in establishing strong alumni relations is how to turn alumni resources, an important university social network, into productive, public, and abundant capital. Based on the established alumni relation framework, the authors have investigated three major universities in China by means of interview so as to source factors that affect their social capital transformations. The three dimensions of cognition, relationship, and structure are the focus of this paper. The authors probe into solutions as follows: Firstly, establishing clear and appropriate values between institutions, alumni, and other stakeholders, and striving to reach the greatest degree of consensus possible; secondly, forming a partnership to meet needs in general based on close personal relations; thirdly, making sure that there are enough functional organizations, venues and channels to establish and maintain relationships with alumni in a holistic and well structured way.

Keywords   alumni relations, resources, social capital

LUO Zhimin (✉)
Institute of Higher Education Research, Yunnan University, Kunming 650091, China
E-mail: luozhimin2005@126.com

CHEN Chunlian
Office of Academic Affairs, Shanghai University of Electric Power, Shanghai 200090, China

WANG Xian
Institute of Higher Education Research, Yunnan University, Kunming 650091, China

Introduction

The university, especially a college or university ranked as first-class, or one aspiring to become top tier in the future, will face many difficulties and dilemmas, among which the prominent one is the imbalance between rising costs and the shortage of sustainable funds provided by the government (Ehrenberg, 2007). This will become more severe with the enhancement of public education rights demands, and the rise of neoliberalism (Rhoads & Torres, 2006). To solve these problems, in addition to seeking the support of the government and engaging with the markets, the most important thing is that universities are supposed to continue obtaining the support of their alumni (Weerts, Cabrera, & Sanford, 2010). According to recent statistics from the Council for Aid to Education, more than one quarter of US universities' total donations (25.6%) come from alumni directly, not to mention other donations that are facilitated by them (Kaplan, 2010, February 3). Apart from this, the features collectively embodied in the list of world-class universities chosen by some institutions and scholars indicate the following phenomenon: The social reputation benefiting world-class universities, adequate funding, and reasonable allocation of resources all require the support of alumni. Currently, the achievements of alumni and their recognition or support of their alma mater are regarded as criteria for assessment as world-class universities by a number of professional assessment agencies (including the annual World University Rankings made by US News and World Report). Regarding the numerous university rankings, social media has even made the comment that "no list beats the alumni donations list" (Cao, 2011).

Alumni support, especially financial, has been increasingly valued and relied on by colleges. Instead of a "delicate" alumni donation program, it is vital and fundamental for colleges that need a steady stream of support from alumni to make a long-term and comprehensive strategy for the development and maintenance of alumni relations in practice (Levine, 2008). As US public higher education is facing a financial deficit, Hurvitz (2010) holds that institutions must endeavor to maintain strong and lasting alumni relations in view of national economic crises. Gallo and Hubschmann (2003, April) believe that universities should establish strong links with their undergraduates. Only in this way can connections be well sustained after graduation. As for empirical research, a

multi-factor analysis model used by Sun, Hoffman, and Grady (2007) explores two years' worth of alumni survey data from US Midwest University to draw the conclusion that establishing a comprehensive alma mater-alumni relationship strategy can greatly improve the alumni donation rate.

Alumni relations refer not only to relations between alumni and their alma mater, but also to university-alumni social relations, which include individual-individual relations, group-individual relations, and group-group relations. These involve alumni, colleges and universities, alumni organizations and other groups. As for how to maintain and develop a good alumni relationship, most literature reviews focus on two research approaches: either individual or institutional characteristics. The former approach studies alumni relationship management strategies based on personal characteristics of alumni that enhance the possibility of alumni university donations. These personal characteristics are delineated as follows: age (see Okunade, Wunnava, & Walsh, 1994; Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Weerts & Ronca, 2007), income level (see Olsen, Smith, & Wunnava, 1989; Clotfelter, 2003; Taylor & Martin, 1995), gender (see Weerts & Ronca, 2008), campus experience (see Gaier, 2005; McDearmon & Shirley, 2009), quality of character (see Utter, Noble, & Brady, 1999), lifestyle (see Weerts & Ronca, 2007) as well as graduation time (see Zhong, Huang, & Guo, 2013), level of education, ethnicity, religion, and working conditions (see Borden, Shaker, & Kienker, 2014). Its analytical and theoretical framework is primarily built on rational choice theory, cognitive development theory, and expectancy theory; the latter lays emphasis on how to utilize and optimize organizations' features or performance to promote alumni relations. This includes image, reputation, and ranking among institutions (Holmes, 2009; Liu, 2006, Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999; Gu & Wang, 2010; Bastedo, Samuels, & Kleinman, 2014), the quality of education and operating conditions (Belfield & Beney, 2000; Marr, Mullin, & Siegfried, 2005), the means and measures to gather capital (Christopherson, 2010; Baade & Sundberg, 1993; Gottfried & Johnson, 2006; Golden, 2010), good organizational performance benefitting from the characteristics of institution leaders (Bastedo et al, 2014), and the development of alumni and alumni organization (Newman & Petrosko, 2011; Deng, 2012). Its main analytical framework comprises social exchange theory, organizational theory, symbol theory, and symbolic interactionism theory.

   Although the two research paths are getting more and more sophisticated, the research objects more and more specific, and the research questions increasingly subtle, some problems still confront everyone in the field. Moreover, with the deepening socialization of higher education given the ever-developing economic context, as well as the changing relationship and status of institutions and alumni, some unavoidable problems arise and become increasingly prominent. For instance, studies to date have confined alumni relations perspectives to alumni donations or a working level of organization (such as alumni organization, school foundations, volunteers, alumni projects, etc.; Dolbert, 2002, September/October), and have not taken overall institutional perspectives into account to view the creation and operation of the entire alumni working mechanism (Hurvitz, 2010). There is a lack of research about the "relational" aspect between alumni and alma mater and a lack of exploration into the inherent theory and mechanism of "relational" aspects of alumni donation behavior. On this phenomenon, McDearmon (2013) once commented, "Despite these pieces of research that help institutions development and promote strategies for alumni donations and operating modes, they only touch the surface. Issues such as internal processes that bring alumni to donate and support their alma maters in other ways have not yet been addressed" (p. 285).

   In response to these problems, this paper, based on social capital theory, chooses three major Chinese comprehensive universities as subjects for a case study, describing their current relations in order to identity relational factors that affect the maintenance and development of alumni relations, and discussing a range of solutions.

Social Capital and Alumni Relations

Social capital, today's most promising theoretical concept first appeared in the field of sociology and then extended to the disciplines of economics, management, education, and politics. It has now become a new perspective to describe and explain problems in each research area. Bourdieu (1985) is considered to be the first one to come up with this concept. He believes that social capital is the combination of the actual and the potential which are closely related to the possession of a lasting network, all rolled into one. Later, Coleman

(1986), Burt (1992), Putnam (2000) and other scholars further develop the social capital theory. In the following 20 years or so, the social capital study has made rapid progress in the abundance of experience collected, the rich theoretical points as well as the formation of different theoretical schools. The study of social capital has thus become vigorous and dynamic. Lin Nan's research is viewed as unique and the most systematic one in the current studies (Liu, 2004).

Lin Nan investigated the social capital in social network relationships from the perspective of individual rational choice action. He believes that social capital is the individual's investment in social relations by means of tools actions and expression actions so as to obtain rewards in the embedded resources (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001). This definition expresses his agreement with Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam and other scholars' view, that social capital is a kind of resource investment embedded in social networks and brings returns. In Lin Nan (2001)'s point of view, social capital is supposed to include the following three aspects: resources, social structure, and individual action. In his theory, the extension of resources is very broad. In terms of the ownership of resources, it includes both personal and collective resources. When it comes to existing forms of resources, it consists of material property such as land, houses, cars, and money, and symbolic resources such as education, prestige, honor, trust, and organizational titles; social structure is considered to be a social network; individual action refers to the actor who has a certain social status, and occupies certain social resources (pp. 29–34). In addition, Lin Nan holds that social capital is flowing and dynamic. Serving as one kind of social network resource, social capital is not static. Individuals and organizations can take advantage of mobility of social capital to fulfill the people's function to construct and select social capital, obtain new or more social capital, and promote the positive mobility of their own capital (pp. 189–191).

Lin Nan's (2001) social capital theory, which possesses distinct characteristics, provides a new perspective for the study of alumni relations. Regardless of whether it is from the point of view of the institutions (collective), or the alumni (individuals), there are still various actors who possess a certain amount of resources in alumni relations. The institutions have resources such as education, reputation and others that the alumni wish to get in order to enhance their value and access to development opportunities. At the same time, alumni have financial, material, informative, and cultural resources and social influence,

which can enable schools to improve their competitiveness in the aspect of institutional funding and operation. Actors include alumni in every walk of society and members of internal institutions such as teachers or administrators. It is these people that, as Lin Nan describes, together form a social network structure.

The feature that alumni relations possess makes it possible for alumni relations to become social capital. Firstly, like other types of social capital, the capital of alumni relations is first of all productive, in that it is able to meet all essential interests of related parties (or "each subject") and achieve certain goals; secondly, it is public, it is embedded in the structure of alumni relations, is nobody's private property and can be accumulated, and made accessible and available for all parties in the interaction. This kind of human relationship interaction is significantly different from what is called "black-box manipulation" in the Chinese cultural context; thirdly, it is proliferative, which indicates that social capital can be accumulated during the process. When universities and alumni cooperate successfully, this will establish contact and trust which is beneficial for future cooperation. Thus, instead of decreasing social capital, when used, this increases. But the problem is how to understand and describe the circumstance of a university's alumni relations. Moreover, the resources embedded in social networks could become actual social capital only through mobilization (Liu, 2001, p. 34). Therefore, another more important problem arises. Namely, by what means to mobilize alumni resources in terms of social network structure so as to make it productive, public, and proliferate? To answer these questions, this paper proposes that the analytical framework for alumni relations contain three basic dimensions:

Cognition dimension. This refers to the opinions and attitudes tendency, acquired and accumulated among all parties in the long process of dealing with the relationship and action. It is not only beneficial for the parties to share one kind of language, knowledge, and stories, but also to promote all parties' common understanding and support towards group expectation and action, which could get the dispersed, selfish individuals together (Li & Yang, 2000), to formulate a mutual recognition of common values and behavior norms.

Tie dimension. This mainly refers to the network (see Bourdieu, 1985) formed

through repeated interaction between alumni and other parties, which is linked to identity. Besides, it indicates the relationship between alumni and other subjects, based on the consanguinity of scholarship. It includes the relationship between the alumni and their alma mater and with alumni organizations, and also comprises the relationship between individuals as alumni, teachers, and students at school. Social capital is invented and runs hand in hand with the connection, without which, the social capital is nowhere to be seen. The stronger the connection, the more likely resources in the alumni relationship may translate into social capital which the parties wish to occupy.

Structural dimension. This refers to the organizations, platforms, and channels that can be used by the connection, with all the valuable resources embedded in this structure (Liu, 2004). Without them, the parties will not be able to form and maintain alumni relations, and thereby various resources the parties hold could not be transformed into the social capital they need. For an individual, the more organizations, platforms, and channels he or she possesses, the greater the social capital's mobility, and the better the quality and quantity of social capital he or she can easily gain.

To sum up, in terms of alumni relations, social capital is generated from the social network alumni-centered structure and includes individual to individual, individuals to group and group to group relations. In this relationship, the recognition is that there is an inner spiritual tie in alumni relations, which determines the direction and the characteristics of the social capital; this tie is the carrier of alumni relations, determining the mobility, spatial distribution and possible supply of the social capital; the structure is the safeguard of alumni relations, determining the activation of the social capital, how to acquire it, and the amount that can be acquired.

The Sample Universities and Method

In general, whenever there are graduates, there are alumni, giving rise to alumni relations. In China, from the1980s, alumni organizations, along with the appearance of the modern university and the enhancement of university autonomy, began to flourish. Alumni relations have thus caught many institutional leaders' attention owing to the sensational effects of huge donations

from alumni (events such as Zhang Lei's[1]) in well-known universities in Western countries.

Three Chinese major comprehensive universities serve as the case in point (hereinafter referred to as University A, University B, and University C), and the study intends to analyze and discuss the current conditions of alumni relations. Firstly, in terms of the construction of alumni relations, those universities that occupy an important position and thus have considerable strength in the higher education landscape in their country are the most representative ones. These three universities are considered major Chinese comprehensive universities aiming to become world-class universities; secondly, those located in the metropolises of northern, central and eastern China have longstanding histories as well as a large number of alumni who enjoy relatively high social status; thirdly, these three universities hold the ambition to become world-class universities as soon as possible. Compared with other institutes, they attach more importance to alumni relations so they need funding support from their alumni for both internationalization and competitive teaching programs; fourthly, compared with other domestic institutions, these three universities have comparatively sound alumni organizations, professional staff, and better records of alumni donations in recent years. The following Table 1 shows some of the relevant circumstances of these three universities:

Research materials including interviews and data quoted herein, except for those with a marked source, are all from China Postdoctoral Science Foundation Project "Alumni Culture and World-class University Building." The survey is based on interviews. Interviewees were selected randomly, involving staff, volunteers, alumni, and students from the above three universities alumni affairs and alumni organizations. Interview content, and arranged and classified interview materials, all focus on the three dimensions (cognition, relationship, and structure) of alumni relations mainly concerned about their evaluation and assessment of alumni relations. In addition, the paper also obtained the supplementary research materials in this article seen as some related texts,

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[1] In 2010, Zhang Lei, who graduated from one of the elite universities in China, donated $8.88 million to Yale School of Management, the largest individual donation that the university has received from an alumnus to date (Zhang Lei studied his MBA at Yale). Once this was made public by Yale University's President Richard C. Levin, social repercussion ensued and retrospection occurred within China's higher education sphere. L. Zhang (2010). 我为什么捐赠给耶鲁大学 888 万美元? [Why did I donate US$8.8 million to Yale University?]. Retrieved February 18, 2016, from http://edu.qq.com/a/20100112/000131.htm

Table 1　Situation of the Three Universities

University	Ranking (2013)	Strategic Goals	Alumni Affairs Organization				Total Sum of Donations from Alumni (1999–2011)	
			Time of Establishment	Time of Resumption	Number of Nationwide Alumni Affairs Branches	Alumni Affairs Organization and Staff	Total Donation (Million RMB)	Donation Ranking
A	1	Strive to build a world-class comprehensive research-oriented, innovative university	Unknown	1999	140	Including Alumni Secretariat, School foundations, Development-Committee, 24 staff	553.44	3
B	5	Aim to become a comprehensive, research-oriented and internationalized world-class university.	1915	1984	84	Including Alumni Secretariat, School foundations, and eight staff (five of them are part-time staff)	46.21	14
C	7	Build with Chinese characteristics, a world-class, internationally renowned high-level university	1930s	Unsure	115	Including Alumni Secretariat and seven staff	205.85	5

Sources: 1. China Academy of Management Science (2013). 中国大学评价 [*2013 Chinese universities ranking*]. Retrieved February 18, 2016, from http://www.kaocool.net/gaokao/bkzn/txdx/20130114/2110.html; 2. CUAA (2012). 2012 中国大学校友捐赠排行榜揭晓，北京大学校友捐赠全国最多 [*China universities alumni donations ranking, Peking University donated the most*]. Retrieved February 18, 2016, from http://www.cuaa.net/cur/2012/10.shtml; 3. Data gathered from official university websites.

e-mails, forum (back) posts and micro-blog from the related universities. The survey began in May 2012 and ended in April 2013.

Findings

This paper aims to present findings from the research and interviews at the case-related universities based on the alumni relation framework presented above, starting from those three dimensions and describing the existing barriers and souces of confusion within alumni relations. This paper aims to identify factors which affect maintaining and developing alumni relations.

Cognition Dimension

As top class universities in China that have the aspiration to become world-class institutions, these three universities are eager to develop alumni relations. They generally employ similar methods to Western universities' alumni affairs offices and create relatively independent organizations. They employ specialized staff and develop innovative alumni activities to foster and maintain alumni relations. For example, University B changed the alumni affairs office from a "nursing agency" with an unproductive team, to one where relatively young people were appointed as leaders and outstanding student volunteers were selected as staff. Alumni affairs office of University C divided their organization into several departments such as Editorial Department, General Department, Information Department, and Liaison Department, etc. With each department equipped with specialized staff. Taking the Editorial Department for example, with one person in charge; it is peculiarly responsible for editing, publishing, and sending the alumni publications.

However, in the specific work process, there are still many obstacles and confusion. As one staff from University A alumni affairs office, said, "The purpose of our work is to widely gather and contact alumni, but the leaders of the university actually measure our work through how much funding we have gathered from alumni. So our work becomes contacting alumni and fund gathering, during which contacting alumni is only a means of raising money for the university" (XI, personal communication, March 27, 2012). Another staff member said, "According to the plan of our university in this year, the rate of alumni contacting has to reach 40%, alumni donations 30%, and the amount of alumni donations 100 million RMB. We all know that, the rate of alumni contacting and alumni donation is very vague, so it is rather easy to meet our

requirement. But 100 million RMB is a concrete number, and it is difficult to achieve if wealthy alumni are not willing to donate. Well! School leaders really have a big 'appetite'!" (LS, personal communication, March 27, 2012). One director from University C alumni affairs office told us that "I engaged in alumni work for several years, and I really do not know what this work is for? The university leaders never tell me how to do it. It would be better to directly call it money gathering" (SK, personal communication, September 4, 2012).

Confusion only comes from leaders. But this deputy director from the alumni liaison office of University B switched the topic back to specific work: "It is so hard to organize an alumni reunion, especially a successful one, because many alumni considered it optional to take part, and some even think of reunions as a burden" (ZS, personal communication, July 3, 2012). One volunteer for alumni work complained that: "Many alumni do not acknowledge our work, and consider that contact with them is merely for sponsorship. They often try to find an excuse to avoid us, because they think our job is to make them donate. Our work is so embarrassing, isn't it?" (WP, personal communication, July 3, 2012). He also took an example that occurred to him:

> I remembered we launched the "phone" campaign before the eve of the 105th anniversary of our university. The alumni we contacted were not all the powerful ones. We wanted to greet them on behalf of the alma mater, introduce the development of the university, and also mention some projects which may need alumni support. Although it had been well organized, and each step and even each word has been carefully designed, in case that they would misunderstand that we were for money, the effect, as far as some other volunteers and I were concerned, was far from what we expected. There were still many alumni who did not appreciate our efforts even considered us annoying when they answered the phone. They believed that the university merely wanted to raise money. (WP, personal communication, July 3, 2012)

In addition, some interviewees put their confusion up to the level of culture and religion. As associate director of alumni affairs from University A said, "It is not suitable to do alumni work in Chinese culture. For example, when athletes win medals, they always attribute their success to the nation, the Party and the people. How many of them credit their honor to their university?" (ZY, personal communication, July 10, 2012). Another official of the alumni organization said that "The objects of my job are scattered in the crowd, similar to the situation of

religion, but the difference lies in the fact that alumni work lacks the same faith and emotion that can bring different people together" (WH, personal communication, July 10, 2012).

From the interview of alumni from the three universities, the authors verified the existence of   confusion. Some of the alumni when they come to the reunion activities think that "it is only a way to entertain," "eating and drinking to have fun," or "a show in Vanity Fair." Speaking of donations, one alumnus said, "It is the responsibilities of millionaires, and the university does not care about my small amount of money" (PJ, personal communication, July 15, 2012). Another alumnus says, "I had to because others did." When it comes to local alumni association, one of the alumni looked a little bit excited, "It is just like Vanity Fair or an exclusive club; ordinary people like us hardly get involved" (CC, personal communication, July 15, 2012). When a former deputy secretary who once worked in an alumni association was asked who worked as leaders in the organization of local alumni associations, he replied "People in that position are not 'the alumni who were enthusiastic and willing to provide volunteer service,' but those who need the job. That's it" (YJ, personal communication, July 15, 2012).

Tie Dimension

Nowadays although in terms of social networks, people are fully connected, alumni relations are still very much relied upon. For the Ivy League institutions in the United States, the alumni relationship is synonymous with one's career and there is no need to emphasize the significance of the alumni relationship. While in China, the alumni relationship is described as a resource development (e.g., He, Guo, & Qian, 2004; Xie, 2010). To develop recourses from alumni such as funds, intelligence, information and other things has become the largest force when building alumni relations. The universities studied here all have good reputations and rich campus resources, meaning that they have incomparable advantages when constructing an alumni relations system. However, from conversations of some interviewees, there are still a lot of obstacles and confusion. One director from University A's alumni affairs office said:

> Now people working for alumni associations at home or abroad all consider that if they want to increase alumni donations, they should first keep in touch with the alumni.

Speaking of this, I am really confused as most of our alumni have good jobs, with high incomes and social status. A lot of alumni work as leaders in our local government, big banks and big corporations, so it is easy for them to donate. When I came to meet them, they were hospitable and entertained me in a well-known local hotel, and sometimes also called other alumni to accompany us. [At the dinner] I wouldn't appeal to them to donate money directly. I thought it was too embarrassing. So I only introduced the circumstances of university development, and told them that their alma maters' development needed their [alumni] support. After dinner, they extended their thanks to their alma mater and left. I thought these alumni were very busy! Next time I should encourage them to donate, but I felt embarrassed to call for them again to have dinner with me! Thinking over it, I can't do that. (LX, personal communication, December 30, 2012)

Parallel this director's sense of confusion, two interviewees from University C also have the same feeling that current alumni work is "sustained just by a few emotional factors," "and just kept at the level of 'eating and drinking.'" Speaking of this, a staff who has worked on alumni connection for nearly 30 years revealed another problem,

People often say that the alma mater is the home of alumni emotions. Alma mater and alumni are a continuum sharing the same destiny. However, our alumni relations are often simplified as a kind of interest connection in practical work. Institutions mainly target objects that donated a lot and have had a major social influence and a high status, and the amount of the donation is considered as a standard of their achievements. (CX, personal communication, May 12, 2012)

An interviewed alumnus echoed this:

Universities think of us only when they need money, raise funds or celebrate anniversaries. Alumni service is more like a slogan. For example, the so-called free credit card is nothing but a thing for the sake of future alumni donations. (YM, personal communication, May 12, 2012)

If the phenomenon mentioned above is a simplistic alumni relationship, the formalized alumni relationship is revealed by some interviewees. An alumni affairs officer from University A believes that "as for alumni relations, our

principals' attention is verbal, only aroused by celebrations and donations. Except for times when they are scheduled to meet outstanding alumni, they essentially turn a blind eye to the alumni" (WX, personal communication, December 30, 2012). A fellow from University C talked about the formalism of alumni activities: "Apart from celebrations or annual activities, what we should do is to work on raising money, or inviting well-known alumni to deliver lectures" (GT, personal communication, May 12, 2012). As for formalism in their work, a volunteer from University C said that, "someone said that the current domestic university alumni work can be summarized as three 'ones,' namely: one publication, one website, one contact list, and I agree with that" (TR, personal communication, May 12, 2012). A former alumni relations officer added: "Although our school established a more advanced global alumni network services platform, there is little interaction between the university and alumni or among alumni and alumni. Distance creates sense of beauty, but it cannot create interaction and productivity" (LF, personal communication, May 12, 2012).

As for the consequences of these hindrances, the authors randomly interviewed some alumni, students, and some student volunteers from the universities in this case. Their feelings are mostly that "no sooner has the person gone away than the tea cools down," "relationship is fragile," and "is not as touching as the university's advertisement." As an alumnus said that he never contacted the alumni association actively. Even if he participated in alumni activities, he just wanted to acquaint some friends with activities that might be helpful for them; a student said they generally have the opportunity to listen to inspirational lectures from several elite alumni, but there is no opportunity to interact directly with them. And for those alumni that the students most want to get touch with, with similar living conditions and common complaints about life, they are not considered by their university for invitation or offered arrangements to attend; some students who once worked as a volunteer in alumni activities said that they just helped to do some logistical work, and seldom contacted alumni, so they do not feel the benefits of alumni relations.

Structural Dimension

As for the organizations, platforms, and access to the establishment and maintenance of alumni relations, the three universities under discussion have restored or developed in a quite short period of time in recent years. For example,

University A has in recent years set up as many as 140 alumni organizations all over the world, through which around 500,000 alumni can contact directly the local alumnus branches and can participate in relevant activities. Apart from doing so, University B has also established a global alumnus network, and has published three journals, two of which are electronic versions. According to an alumni work report of University C, it has established a social network among the alumni at all levels in terms of grade, location, and industry. Additionally, these three universities adopted a very similar organizational structure, which features the alumni affairs office and the secretariat of the alumni association responsible for both administration and management work. However, on the part of the development of alumnus relations, the problems are obvious. As a director from alumni affairs office of University C said:

> I will retire next year. I have been working in the alumni office for nearly a decade. Though I could not boast about what I did, I can still share with you some of my viewpoints. There are two things that should be pointed out that are obvious. One is that the need of the students for their alma maters' help is "obvious." Alumni have to use alma maters as a platform to develop themselves. After graduating from university, although they could fulfill their needs in society, they are also looking forward to their alma mater for continuous support and help in the career development. Nevertheless, the second problem is that the universities are often "blind" to these needs, because of the universities' lack of overall thinking and matched institutional construction. The gap between the two leads to the marginalization of alumni' need. (LJ, personal communication, May 12, 2012)

One HR deputy director who once worked in the school's alumni affairs office agrees with the view above:

> According to my observation during the period when I worked in the alumnus association, I found that we have little communication with the alumni. The way of communication is single, and depends too much on alumni organizations around the country. As for these alumni branches, the relationship is relatively loose, either dependent on some well-known local old alumni, or on some "young Turks" who want to seek for an individual business development platform. In a word, we rarely take a systematic look at this problem. (HZ, personal communication, November 29, 2012)

This interviewee reflects a fundamental question in current university alumni relation management, which is the lack of the necessary communication between universities and alumni. Some interviewees reveal that they have no choice. A young development director of the alumni project from University A mentioned that:

> Speaking of alumni work, except for occasion like hosting large anniversaries, the university would assign some temporary staff to us. Otherwise, only few of us deal with daily affairs. You can imagine that how tremendous our work is in a university with a long history and hundreds of thousands of alumni. Of course, we can't let our leaders feel we are idle. Everyone has their own work. Besides raising money, we send e-mails and publications to some alumni who can be contacted and contact several important alumni in accordance to the leaders' intention. (WS, personal communication, November 2, 2012)

The interviewee above thought that workloads were too heavy and they were short of staff, therefore only able to do some routine work to cope with basic requirements. And the following deputy director from University B alumni affairs office said that it was hard for the agency to fulfill the functions entrusted in him by the school:

> As for the object of the alumni office, the university make it contacting and then serving the alumni, and helping the university in its development. In fact, none of these functions is what we should do, and we are not able to do it. And even if we did as required, the outcome would never be successful. First, our school has hundreds of thousands of alumni, and many alumni still did not give us their exact contact information. Do you think it is possible for us to contact all of them? I am confused why the university does not communicate with them face to face when the students were still at university but ask us who are not even know them to communicate with them after their graduation. Don't you think it is ridiculous? Second is about alumni service. We need resources to meet the requirement. But all the resources are controlled by various departments and subordinated colleges. But we have nothing at hand. How can we serve the alumni? Third is about development. It is impossible to achieve the first and second requirements, not to mention the third one. (ZY, personal communication, September 4, 2012)

For the consequences of those problems, many interviewees believe it leads to a

shortage of substantive content in alumni relations work, and may only be superficial. In addition, some interviewees reported that the university's administrative bodies, teaching colleges (departments) and teachers are indifferent to the alumni-related work. Most of them believe that it is the duty of the university fund, alumni affair office and alumni association and none of their business.

Discussion and Implications

Firstly, this study found that although interviewees in the universities selected as case studies mentioned their alumni organizations, their specialized staff, alumni networks, alumni donations projects and personal traits of alumni, they did not position these things as important factors affecting alumni relations, which is different from the findings of other recent research (e. g., Christopherson, 2010; Chen & Feng, 2011; Sun, Fan, & Liu, 2010). On the contrary, the most important issue they were concerned and worried about was that the institutions, alumni, and related parts lacked understanding as to the meaning of alumni relations. This obviously constituted an important factor in whether or not they could work effectively going forward.

According to social capital theory, this understanding or cognition mainly refers to opinions and attitudes towards relations between alumni. It not only affects ideas about work, the development pattern of the alumni relationship and its status in institutional development, but also affects whether such a relationship can be established and maintained soundly and regularly. It also determines whether they can form a common understanding and support for alumni relations actions, such as donation gathering and alumni services. However, from the interviewees' reflections, the alumni relationship which has been considered a noble mission has a long and arduous way to go given that it is currently a donation gathering movement of a temporary nature, and restricted to alumni affairs agencies and at the foundational level. It is also a way to "make a fortune"; from the alumni point of view, the relationship which was once admired as a "community of destiny" now becomes a mere "bilateral interest trade." Deviation from the true value orientation of the alumni relationship may render institutions short of systematic and sustainable action, making alumni affairs organizations fail to effectively carry out their work, and dampening the

initiative and enthusiasm of alumni to participate in the affairs of their alma mater.

Based on this, the study suggests that the confusion of interviewees and the problems revealed in the case studies mentioned essentially point to the fact that healthy and sustainable alumni relations need to establish clear and correct value guidance, which should come from the university culture, and reflect traditional culture encompassing equality, tolerance and love. The so-called equality refers to institutions having to treat their alumni and future alumni (students) equally, and giving them equal opportunities to participate in activities. Only on the basis of equality is it possible to form a relationship of mutual support and in which alumni and their alma mater share the same destiny; so-called tolerance refers to the idea that every person is a member of a big family or community. Regardless of their various backgrounds, personalities, temperaments, and aptitudes, they can still fairly truthfully accept each other and help one another. Only in this way can the two parts respect and learn from each other for mutual benefit; this so-called love requires that all parts take care of each other, and are even willing to take care of "strangers." Universities must learn to appreciate, love and care for every alumnus in their role of guardian. So they could feel what they have benefited from is more than what they have given to their alma mater, and that they will be ready to "repay their alma mater one day."

From the viewpoint of the authors, the ideas of equality, tolerance, and love take the form of "creating and sharing" value guidance. This "creating and sharing" is so that individual alumni, or would-be alumni recognize the "alma mater-alumni" relation as a "destiny community" imbued with shared support, honor or disgrace, growth, happiness and benefits stemming from their mutual development. All of them are willing to give passion and take action. Harvard University is considered to be the university which accepts the most donations from its alumni every year, led by slogans such as "sharing the Harvard experience!" "sharing Harvard, so as to support Harvard!" Such slogans acknowledged inside and outside the university are public representations following integration of the value of "creating and sharing" and the university tradition. Now it has become a common understanding for Harvard University and its alumni; something on the basis of which they can communicate.

For this purpose, "creating and sharing" should be positioned as the starting point of university alumni relations work, and the final standard to measure success or failure. During the alumni relations development stage, standards that

conform to this value are seen as worth preserving, advocating for and promoting. Otherwise they will be discarded or corrected. Therefore, this value ought to be applied by institution leaders as far as possible and incorporated in alumni activities to ensure continuous transmission of this message. Scenarios of activities filled with a sense of ceremony should be created for alumni and students to participate in, so that they may realize that they cannot grow without the care and help of the alma mater and its community members; institutions should often introduce to alumni their educational mission, vision, and hope. To pursue and sustain excellence the university needs every alumni, student and parent's attention and support.

Secondly, the study also found that while handling the alumni relationship, the universities discussed in this paper are still at the initial stage, with "only emotion maintaining," "relationship simplification," and "relations formalization" addressed so far according to interviewees. These issues of the alumni relationship in domestic institutions are very representative. It implied alumnus work is still in the perceptual stage relying on natural consanguinity of scholarship, and of course it inevitably will appear to be a "loose relationship" as some interviewees felt.

As the nucleus of social capital theory and one of the most important dimensions, a relationship is the basis and premise of the related parts' resources that are transformed into social capital. The degree of the relationship determines the mobility, benefits, and amount of social capital accumulated. Some problems that exist in the alumni relationship in the universities discussed here prove that the relationship is now weak, which may make the alumni relationship unstable, easily dissipated, and lacking in cohesion. For this reason, this study advocates cementing the alumni relationship in a social network structure. On the one hand, institutions should expand the scope of relations so that they cover all the alumni, stretching to undergraduates and to their parents or families, and thus forming a comprehensive social network structure. Concerning this, one interviewee from University B worried,

> Our alumni relationship, in the final analysis is only a kind of relationship between the university we represent and parts of its alumni body. Compared with European and American institutions, we should cultivate students with alumni relations awareness in advance, and take the connection between undergraduate and alumni status seriously. (JP, personal communication, September 17, 2012)

On the other hand, among all parties, the university should establish a substantial alumni relationship. If students can form a kind of "kinship relationship" with the university once they are admitted, then the institutions need to establish the essential relationship through all kinds of mechanisms on the condition of this relationship. This kind of relation will not only make alumni work step into a more reasonable track, but also will strengthen a weak relationship which depends on emotion alone. So, how to build a more substantial alumni relationship?

One interviewee, after organizing the large number of alumni donations in recent years, found that alumni donating is more like a return to one teacher or management than to their universities. It shows that establishing a substantive alumni relation must be based on individuals, which means the university firstly must create the opportunities and conditions that are beneficial for individuals to establish direct and close personal relationships, such as the relationship between alumni and undergraduates, alumni and teachers, and undergraduates and teachers. Some alumni expressed their hope that the university could help them establish individual alumni relationships. This is in accordance with individual actions that Lin (2001) mentioned in social capital theory. He thinks that only starting with individuals and related activities can one grasp the essence of social capital; only through some membership status can individuals seize the capital of the relation structure (p. 35). Thus, instead of "alumni," institutions should pursue the development of relationships with each alumnus, because alumni desire to be recognized and valued by their alma mater. At the same time, universities should utilize the "fresher's week," "campus open day," etc. to construct and maintain a close relationship. It may let them feel proud and moved and win the family's heart, laying a good foundation for obtaining their support (leading to financial donations).

However, if this relationship is to be maintained and strengthened along with both sides obtaining social capital, it should be built on the needs of each side. On this issue, Dr Susan C. Dolbert (2002, September/October), the Alumni Association President and Executive Director of Arizona State University, used her own experience to prove that "if they [alumni] don't find what they want, they leave" (p. 12). The reason why some interviewees who are alumni and students in the case are indifferent to alumni activities lie in the fact that the university failed to build a relationship reliant on interaction; and even more important is that these activities failed to meet their needs. In this regard, an

alumnus' remark was very profound. He said: "For one's alma mater, how can one make requirements of her? It is similar to the relationship between son and mother: The son can't ask anything from his mother, but he has needs from her" (XX, personal communication, April 20, 2013). Comparing "require" and "need," which in Chinese are different only in tone, we can see that alumni do not have the right to "require" their alma mater to do something for them, but they still have needs, just as institutions need alumni' donations.

Therefore, when institutions build alumni relations, they cannot rely on "blood relations" or depend on any part's charity or dedication, but should fully respect and take the needs of the relevant personnel into account. When they can gain something either mental or substantially, that is to get a kind of social capital, or that their requirements have intersection with any relation level, this relationship can be really built up on the interaction and be able to be continued. For young alumni, vocational development is a common need. When they get confused, perhaps they need the support from alma mater most. Institutions should care about these circumstances and respond to them in time: Before they graduate, universities should help them avoid career confusion through opening courses of career design guidance, or inviting graduates back to university to deliver speeches about their successful experience, so that they could dedicate to their work smoothly; when they are to graduate, institutions can provide person-to-person instruction and face-to-face service to them to answer their doubts about the future; when they are at work, institutes can help them get in touch and build relations as soon as possible with local alumni associations and let them gain support from these relations through alumni association orientation programs and other measures.

Thirdly, in terms of the structure that the social capital theory emphasized, the case universities interviewees' problems and confusions indicate that relationships need investing considerable time and resources to be built, maintained, developed or redeveloped (Yang, 1994). In terms of the construction of alumni relations, the mere possession of well-organized alumnus affairs agencies and some professionals is not enough, institutions should also establish many reasonable organizations, platforms, and accesses that can connect relations. Only in this way, alumni relations might be established and be maintained, the potential social capital could be activated, and therefore universities and alumni can easily get more and better social capital. Otherwise, it will make the alumni affair agencies lack resources (such as lack of staff and

funds), which makes it difficult to further expand the work and is only restricted to the form, and allows other parts of the institution and the staff to remain absent from the alumni relationship. For example, interviewing the case universities, the authors found that, when it came to alumni issues, most teachers and administrators believed that the task of serving alumni belonged to the alumni foundation, alumni affairs office or alumni association, rather than being their own business. On the other hand, it would lead to a result where these institutions take an administrative model to deal with alumni relations,. If alumni agencies are solely relied on, this would put the emphasis of alumni work on the development of these institutions, meaning that the commitment of the alumni services would be diluted.

In response to these issues, the study believes that it is necessary for those elite institutions that aim to be world-class universities to adopt a holistic structure to guarantee the organizations, platforms, and accesses that are used for maintaining alumni relationship are realistic and pertinent. The so-called holistic structure method means the institutes take their own organizational strength as the foundation and value guidance of "creating and sharing" as the guidance. In the holistic view, integrated with all levels and all aspects of resources, the alumni relationship can be constructed and maintained by interaction among all parts.

In terms of its organization, the urgent task is to transform the functions of the alumni affairs office. Alumni affairs office could neither play a role as a specialized alumni agency for connecting nor a specialized alumni agency for serving. It should be a coordinating and a specialized agency to coordinate internal and external resources to satisfy relevant parties' requirements. That is to say, based on its own resources and conditions, the alumni affairs office cannot directly contact the alumni, serve alumni, and serve the alma maters development. To achieve this goal, it must be achieved through its role of integrating recourses both on and off campus. Namely by the coordinated role that the alumni affairs office plays, it can make the school's caucus system, administrative system, teaching and research systems (including faculty, grade, and class) and the external alumni association system all able play their structured role in the alumni relationship. A substantial contact can be established through this structure to form a good situation with multipoint linkage among the alumni, undergraduates, teachers and administrators, students and alumni with their parents and families, employers and other relevant staff. In alumni relation structure, platforms refer to the "nodes" where alumni and other relevant parties

can interact. Alumni activities can be considered as "nodes" in alumni networks. Institutions can turn alumni related content into projects and implement it in various specific business sectors or related teaching teams, student groups, and alumni organizations. According to various alumni group and group members alumni activities vary in   size and set different programs. Whether the program is successful or not, we can judge it from the number of members who participated in it and the how many of a certain group were involved. It should be emphasized that the alumni activities must be plentiful, and the sources diversified. Some projects can be developed only by the university or be bid on publicly by teachers and students. Some projects require the university to cooperate with other agencies, and some projects can develop merely with external agencies and may be adopted into the alumni relationship system after consulting. Some projects may also charge fees, or give some discount for alumni and students. For instance, on the University of California Berkeley alumni relationship platform, career and education projects amount to nearly 20 kinds in total, such as Career Counseling Library, Dream Job Coaching, the Advisor Team, Flex Jobs, and Horizon Studies Lifelong Learning etc. (CAL Alumni Association, 2012).

Suppose that alumni activities are the key "nodes" of the structure of the alumni relationship, the alumni channel is an access channel, and a way to make connections. These alumni accesses include networks, publications, and identity cards. As for the job hunting network of alumni network, on the one hand it helps the graduates find jobs through university alumni relationships; on the other hand it also helps employers contact the graduates. This network, according to Luo Huiwen's (2010) argument, could be built online or offline. The former is based on the alumni database, so that students can easily find and contact some alumni who work in their concerned industry or occupations, get to know the relevant industry and career information, and obtain help on how to develop a personal career planning as well as job hunting; As for the later, institutes can organize some alumni and students to participate in the co-activities in the way of forums or simple dinner buffet etc., and which is simultaneously a good chance for the students to understand the actual needs and the trend of latest industry developments. Students who obtained help from the channels will be willing to participate in the similar events organized by their alma mater and therefore a virtuous circle of mutual benefit can be formed.

Conclusion

The practice of worldwide higher education development shows that a good relationship gradually proves its significant role in both the current running of institutions and their long-term development, and has increasingly become an essential factor for universities in heading towards world-class status. At the same time, that institutions strengthen and pay attention to alumni relations work deepens and expands their training role in the community. This case study makes an analysis and discussion of the relationship beyond the donations level in developing the alumni relations framework as seen through the lens of social capital theory. The study advocates maintaining and developing good alumni relations in terms of three dimensions of cognition (value-oriented, identity construction), relationships (alumni relation building), and structures (building of organizations, platforms, and access), which makes it possible to transform massive hidden resources into productive, public and proliferative alumni relation social capital.

In spite of the fact that the alumni relationship in three case universities are not representative of all the universities in China and are different from Western elite universities in historical tradition and institutional management. The issues reflected by the interviewees and the findings and conclusions of this study will provide inspiration and reference to improve the building of current university-alumni relations. For example, "creating and sharing" should be positioned as starting point and ultimate goal of university alumni relations work, and on such bases we should be able to build a substantial alumni relationship between universities and alumni taking the needs of each side into consideration. Moreover we should establish and maintain substantial alumni relations with the aid of related organizations, platforms, and with decent access. Since the issue of alumni relation is complex, the utilization of social capital theory in this paper is just the beginning. The paper expects to further the study and discuss the formation of collective cognition, the building of alumni relations, and issues of logic related to relevant actors in the future.

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