

Academic Personnel System Reforms in China: Trajectory and Tensions

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A homicide on a university campus in Shanghai made headlines in June 2021, stirring up public emotions and sentiments about the tenure system in academe. According to the media, the suspect, a mathematics faculty member, killed the head of the School of Mathematical Science for alleged failure to have his three-year job contract renewed at Fudan University. Prior to that, he had worked at another university for three years after returning from the United States, with a PhD from Rutgers University and a few years of postdoctoral research at the National Institutes of Health and Johns Hopkins University.

While such a tragedy is extremely rare, it reveals two major isomorphic changes that have crept into human resource management in China's higher education. On the one hand, the trajectory of change is toward homogenization in the context of globalization. The adoption of tenure at Fudan University and other upper-tier institutions is not only indicative that they can afford the resources to adopt and maintain the system, but also that they need the institutional legitimacy it provides in quest for world-class status. After all, North American higher education is the envy of the world. On the other hand, however, the trajectory of change is pulled by idiosyncrasy which is largely grounded in governmental mandates, institutional requirements, and local cultures and traditions. It is necessary to ask why tenure can trigger a homicide and stir up public emotions and sentiments. If tenure is embraced just as a trade-off between economic security and individuals' ability to meet the designated quantity/level requirements for articles, awards, research projects, and talent titles, as witnessed at many higher education institutions (HEIs), then the system may no longer be the same as recognized in the larger academic community. Apparently, tenure and other academic personnel system reforms (APSR) are important and relevant to an international audience who are interested in the changing landscape of China's higher education.

The Trajectory

Theoretically, three models have evolved over the past four decades of APSR, transforming the relationship between faculty and their institutions from the career-based cadre identity model to the position-based public contractual model and to the current dual-track model. In the first model, faculty hold cadre identity and are given permanent appointments when hired to a regular faculty position. In the second model, faculty are appointed on a fixed-term contract, which is position-based and competition-driven. In the third model, the position-based public contractual model coexists with tenure, particularly at upper-tier institutions. A literature review reveals, however, that there is a mismatch between labor law and contract law theories in some relevant judicial decisions.

Chronologically, the four decades of APSR can be divided into the following three phases.

Abstract

While the past four decades of academic personnel system reforms have changed the relationship between faculty and their institutions and boosted the competitiveness of China's higher education in the international arena, further reforms or change will be required to reduce tensions and achieve a sustainable future.

In the first or the experimental phase from 1985 to 1993, APSR began to move away from the state authority toward the market. In 1986, two government policies were issued to require that faculty appointment systems be adopted at IHEs, that there be a quota of positions staffed by state-salaried faculty, and more. In the second or the consolidation phase from 1994 onward, personnel management began to move from a state authority model to a contractual model, with individuals' performance tied to rewards and sanctions, promotion and demotion, and hiring and firing. In the third or the quest-for-world-class phase from 1998 onward, over 100 institutions have adopted tenure and, at the same time, maintained the position-based public contractual model, reconciling the dual track systems based on the principle of "old rules for old faculty and new rules for new hires."

Tensions

Overall, the four decades of APSR have changed the relationship between faculty and HEIs, increased institutional autonomy in personnel decisions, developed a culture of competition in the workplace, fostered the emergence of an academic labor market, and boosted the competitiveness of China's higher education in the international arena. To achieve a sustainable future, further reforms or change will be required to address the following tensions.

First, a lack of alignment between stated institutional values and how well these values play out in reality is a source of tension that needs to be addressed. A survey of litigation in the database of China Judgements Online reveals that, from 2007 to 2020, there were approximately 168 civil cases arising from personnel disputes between faculty and their institutions. The causes of action include civil disputes over resignation (37 percent), employment contract (36 percent), dismissal (25 percent), and appointment contract (2 percent). In addition to civil litigation, there are also administrative claims filed against HEIs. To a large degree, the exhaustion-of-remedies doctrine has prevented many prospective faculty plaintiffs from filing administrative lawsuits against their institutions. Simply put, the poor fit between individuals and institutions has resulted in some academics feeling exploited, some exploiting their institutions, and/or both becoming victims.

Second, faculty tiering is another source of tension that needs to be addressed. In fact, since 1993, under the push of a series of government-initiated talent programs, APSR have created a four tiers of faculty at top-tier institutions: faculty with specific talent titles, tenure-line faculty, non-tenure track state-salaried faculty, and non-tenure track and non-state-salaried faculty. Tier 3 and 4 faculty by far outnumber those in tiers 1 and 2, but the latter tend to earn substantially more than the former. This policy and practice may help attract the designated types of talent, but it may not necessarily help discover and inspire the previously unknown talent and motivate the majority of faculty.

Third, academic inbreeding is an additional source of tension that needs to be addressed. Notwithstanding the fact that academic inbreeding may limit the scope of hiring the best possible candidates, solidify hierarchical relationships in the workplace, and perpetuate unfair power dynamics, it is still a practice at some HEIs. Usually, inbred faculty are those who have obtained their PhD from the institution where they are employed and have personal connections with individuals who have legitimate power there. More often than not, inbred faculty are expected to be loyal members of the leader's group that competes with other groups (or individuals). Needless to say, academic inbreeding can easily turn an academic unit into a political one in which power, alliances, and networks tend to be valued above integrity, fairness, and excellence.

Conclusion

The four decades of APSR have promoted the transformation and development of China's higher education. To achieve a sustainable future, further reforms or change will be required to improve the misalignment between stated institutional values and how well they play out in reality, discover and inspire the previously unknown talent, motivate the majority of faculty, and translate collegueship into esprit de corps. ▲

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