Academic Culture in Shanghai's Universities

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Much attention has been focused on how market reforms are affecting the higher education system in China. With the largest number of universities in China, Shanghai serves as a good barometer for the state of China's academic culture and the impact of socialist market reforms. Not surprisingly, the academic profession in Shanghai's universities has much in common with its counterparts in other parts of China. But Shanghai academics also closely resemble their global counterparts in many respects.

Shanghai's Academics

When compared to the 14 countries in the 1992–1993 Carnegie International Study of the academic profession, Shanghai's academics fall almost in the middle in terms of age (45 years) and gender profiles (73 percent male and 23 percent female), with six countries above and four below in both profile tables. They also ranked similarly in satisfaction with staff collegial relationships (63 percent satisfied, 30 percent neutral, 2 percent dissatisfied), importance placed on publications in tenure considerations (67 percent agreed, 22 percent neutral, 11 percent disagreed), and views of the value of student evaluations for teaching (68 percent agreed, 24 percent neutral, 8 percent disagreed).

Shanghai's universities are increasingly affected by global economic forces. While access to the Internet and exchanges with academics around the world are sure to influence their perspective to some extent, academics in China also stand apart from academics in other parts of the world in a number of ways—in the national economy, the financial and administrative organization of universities, and the stage of educational reforms currently under way in the country.

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During the 1996–1997 academic year, we conducted a survey of academics in five departments at three key universities in Shanghai—Jiaotong University, Shanghai University, and East China Normal University. A total of 276 academics responded to our survey. The data below illustrate ways in which Shanghai academics differ from colleagues in other parts of the world.

Academic Attitudes

Compared to their counterparts surveyed in other countries, Shanghai academics had fewer previous academic appointments at other institutions of higher education (95 percent had worked at only one or two institutions). Their experience was mostly limited to the institution where they were originally appointed. This is largely a function of the *danwei* system, which limits mobility after the initial posting. Market forces will probably affect this system in years to come. Some universities, particularly those in the wealthier southern regions of China, are already attracting popular professors from other parts of the country.

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Chinese academics rate their salaries as less adequate than their counterparts in other countries. Consequently, they are more likely to engage in paid consultancy work (90 percent) than academics in other countries (i.e., Hong Kong 13 percent, Japan and the Netherlands 15 percent, Germany 16 percent, Austria and Sweden 24 percent, England and the United States 27 percent, Israel 38 percent, Brazil 53 percent, Korea 54 percent, Chile 59 percent, Mexico 67 percent, and Russia 81 percent). They are less likely to hold nonacademic positions outside their institutions than academics in most other countries. Yet, 24 percent hold other full-time academic positions outside their universities. This compares with 6 percent in the United States, the second-highest in the international rankings for this indicator. Shanghai academics also rated technology for teaching and computer facilities lower than their counterparts around the world.

Low salaries and modest working conditions seem to be the major factors affecting Shanghai academics' commitment to the academy. Over 50 percent responded negatively to the question: "If you had to do it over again, would you still choose to be an academic?" However, it is worth noting that staff in Shanghai still overwhelmingly view academics as influential opinion leaders (61 percent agreed, 33 percent neutral, 6 percent disagreed), at a level higher than that reported in other countries (England 11 percent,

Israel 12 percent, Korea 63 percent). On top of this, they rate the intellectual atmosphere at their institutions more highly (84 percent good or excellent) than their counterparts elsewhere.

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The perceived quality of students may have something to do with the high ratings given to intellectual atmosphere. The preparation of their incoming freshmen in mathematics, quantitative reasoning, and written and oral communication was given higher marks than was the case for other countries surveyed. Given good students (and modest resources for research), one might expect these academics to prefer teaching over research. In fact, 84 percent of Shanghai academics express the need to improve teaching and find better ways to evaluate it. Nevertheless, they fall right in the middle internationally with respect to preference for teaching or research, and give near equal preference to each.

While 46 percent of the respondents feel pressured to do more research than they would like, relatively few (19 percent) agree with the statement that "the pressure to publish reduces the quality of teaching in this institution." Perhaps they have found a creative way to resolve this common dilemma faced by academics everywhere, or perhaps the publishing game is easier to play in China due to the proliferation of academic journals.

Some extremes in reply patterns may be attributed to the fact that comparatively few Shanghai academics hold advanced degrees, especially doctorates. This most likely accounts for their perspective toward the academic disciplines. More than academics elsewhere in the world, the Shanghai respondents expressed a stronger sense of professional obligation to apply their knowledge to serve society (93 percent agreed). Yet, they expressed a lower level of affiliation with their academic discipline (23 percent rated it very important) than academics elsewhere. Is this due to the belief that academic disciplines are currently unable to provide the right kinds of knowledge needed for a rapidly changing China? Or, is it simply because a relatively small number have higher degrees and, therefore, most lack a fuller appreciation of the potential of their academic discipline to improve society? It is perhaps understandable, then, that when asked if this is a particularly creative time in their fields, only a relatively small number respond affirmatively.

Commitment to the academic profession is also affected by other factors. For example, Shanghai academics report less autonomy in teaching and research than do academics in other countries. This is partly due to the fact that national five-year plans set out the research agendas for staff. In teaching, course content tends to be standardized. Consequently, it is not surprising that 73 percent of Shanghai academics view their administrators as autocratic. Finally, though 95 percent agree that international connections are relevant to a scholar's evaluations for promotion, only 11 percent had studied or traveled overseas in the last three years.

The Expansion

The findings in our survey of Shanghai academics coincide with broader developments in China, which is now experiencing the largest expansion of higher education in this century. In September 1999, China will increase first-year enrollments by 48 percent, from 1.08 to 1.53 million students. A major aim of the expansion is to stimulate the economy, since Chinese parents are more than willing to spend for their child's higher education. Shanghai already has 20 percent of the relevant age group in higher education, and this may be increased to 30 percent by 2000, 40 percent by 2005, and 50 percent by 2010. As far as being able to pay tuition goes, the average annual income in Shanghai is now U.S. $3,000, and may reach U.S. $5,000 by 2000 and U.S. $10,000 by 2005. Nevertheless, rising unemployment brought on by the Asian economic crisis has also been a factor in the policy decision to keep more young people out of the labor market for a few years by opening up admissions to higher education.

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The expansion has great potential for improving higher education. It can bring the student-teacher ratio more in line with that in developed countries, as well as raise teacher salaries. It also has implications for the major functions of the university. The transition from elite to mass higher education requires strengthened teaching strategies. A larger undergraduate population can help to support more graduate students, and subsequently strengthen the research capacity. The expansion will create greater diversity in the system. There is a potential for the service function of the university to undergo major change as well, especially as market forces continue to take hold. Inevitably, it is the academic profession that will be the driving force behind how universities maintain and improve their central functions of teaching, research, and service. ■