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Academic Departments in China

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THIS paper will describe the management of academic departments in Beijing, The People's Republic of China. In 1987 (March-June), 1991 (February-March) and 1993 (May-June) the author was a visiting professor in the Department of Language Study at Northern Jiaotong University (located in Beijing). He used these opportunities to study how academic departments are managed and how faculty are motivated through reward systems. Such inquiry is relevant as there are many parallels between the functioning of academic departments in the U.S. and China. Comparison and contrast can provide enhanced understanding of both approaches.

Academic departments in China have parallels with academic departments in the United States but there are marked differences. The management of academic departments in China is based on the unique development of that country.

In 1949, The People's Republic of China was established and for the next 30 years China was essentially a closed society to the outside world. There was limited interaction with other countries, and thus, little knowledge of how foreign academic departments were managed. The only exception to this would be the Soviet academic system as China did maintain ties with the Soviet Union during this period.

Between 1966-1976, China experienced a "cultural revolution." During this time education was criticized and changed drastically. Universities were shut down for the most part. Many administrators and intellectuals were taken from their positions and forced to work in the countryside in "re-education camps." All books were banned except for works by/about Chairman Mao (the Chinese leader at the time). Students were taught primarily about the basics of agriculture (i.e. planting and harvesting of crops). This period, which ended with the death of Chairman Mao, stunned the growth of education in China.

In 1979, an open door policy was implemented in an effort to help China compete with the outside world. Since that time, trade and joint business ventures with the west have been emphasized strongly, specifically with the United States. As interaction with the west increases, Chinese academic departments have worked to learn from practices of academic

departments in the west. Each year, educational exchanges involving students, faculty, and administrators occur between China and the United States. The learning process is a two-way street.

Higher education in China has shifted from academic approaches practiced in the former Soviet Union and has begun to adopt practices used in the U.S. Thus, they are "trying to make their universities more comprehensive institutions in which teaching and research are expected to reinforce one another" (Jacobsen, October 28, 1987, p. 41). The Soviet approach puts far more emphasis on research.

Northern Jiaotong University in Beijing, exemplifies a typical university in China and the administration of its academic departments is consistent with government regulations. A brief description of the university structure, and the role of the academic chairpersons within this structure, will clarify some of the similarities and differences with university structures in the United States.

Faculty generally teach two semesters (17 weeks each) a year and teach roughly eight hours a week. Aside from teaching, some faculty will research teaching methods and subject areas which are pertinent to their expertise. Annual salaries vary between 1,000 to 1,800 yuan ($300 to $500) a year and annual bonuses equal about 25% of their salary. Salaries are the same at each level (instructor, assistant professor, and full professor) but bonuses vary within each level. Thus, the bonus system is similar to the merit pay system in the U.S.

Single faculty live four to a room (about the size of a typical U.S. dormitory room) and they can be given their own room after about 5-6 years as a faculty member. Rent is minimal (proportionate to an American paying $5 U.S. a month). A retirement pension is provided by the government. Housing is based on position, age, marital status, and membership in the communist party.

Key differences between the Chinese and U.S. systems deal with professors serving as role models and the selection of who will work as professors. Teachers in China are expected to serve as role models in moral, as well as academic, development. Li Xingwan, vice-chairman of the Chinese Educational Workers' Union (CEWU), emphasizes the importance of moral development. He states "CEWU and its branches should encourage teachers to improve themselves and turn the younger generation into one devoted to socialism with high moral standards, academic knowledge and discipline" (Li Xing, 1987, p . 3).

Academic faculties stereotypically are overworked, underpaid, and living conditions are inferior. Thus, the teaching profession is not as popular as it is in the U.S. For example, Yang Chuanwei, president of the Beijing Teachers College, reports the number of people who want to join academic faculties has dropped considerably. "Out of 802 students enrolled by the college last year, there were only 57 who had selected the college as their first choice for higher education" (Yang Chuanwei, 1987, p. 4).

The author conducted a written survey of students who were enrolled in the teachers training program at Northern Jiaotong University. Two questions from the survey solicited their opinions regarding teachers serving as role models and their placement in their teacher training program.

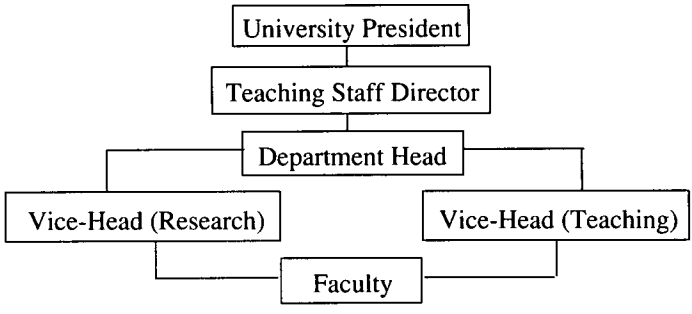
Twenty students were asked to respond to the following statements: (1) "As an English teacher, my behavior will serve as an important role model for my students regarding social responsibility" and (2) "Teaching English was my first choice over other types of jobs." They were asked to respond strongly disagree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD).

The following table indicates students responses:

Question #l (moral role model)	SA	A	N	D	SD
	35%	45%	15%	5%	0
Question #2 (selected teaching)	SA	A	N	D	SD
	10%	20%	0	35%	35%

Thus, the environment within which Chinese and U.S. academic chairpersons work differs.

Academic chairpersons are appointed by the university president. No evaluation is done by superiors or subordinates. Primary criteria for selection is based on position (associate or full professor) and productivity in research. A faculty member must have at least a B.A. degree before being promoted to associate professor. The following hierarchical chart provides a description of the university chain of command.



The Department of Language Study at Northern Jiaotong University exemplifies a typical department within the university. There are forty faculty members who teach graduate and undergraduate courses. Primary courses of instruction deal with English as a major area of study and English as a second language (a minor area of study). The department currently has 150 English majors and 1200 students studying English as a second language.

The morale and motivation of faculty, and the role of the academic chairperson in these processes, is a unique situation compared to the United States. Tenure and academic freedom, as we know it in the U.S., does not exist in China. Faculty members "belong" to their universities for life. They cannot change occupations or move to another university without strong connections in the central government. They also cannot be fired by the academic chairperson. Faculty appointments are in effect until mandatory retirement (55 for women and 60 for men). When this author shared his pleasure with receiving tenure in the U.S., his Chinese counterparts did not see this as especially good or bad news since their teaching assignments are permanent. When this author moved to another unrelated academic institution they perceived this as very unusual.

With such a system, many Chinese universities have a very low student-faculty ratio. At Beijing University, the ratio is about 4 to 1 (Jacobsen, October 28, 1987, p. 42). Lao Ze Yi, President of West China University of Medical Sciences, states "If they do a good job or don't do a good job, they still keep their positions.... We can't fire anybody" (Jacobsen, October 28, 1987, p. 42).

Faculty can move around within a department though. For instance, they can teach undergraduate or graduate students, required or elective courses, and they can focus more on teaching or research (depending upon the needs of the department). Academic chairpersons have direct control over such moves.

Motivation of faculty is seen as a primary problem. Often the more seniority a faculty member has the less likely he/she will be productive beyond teaching his/her assigned

classes. Academic chairpersons can refer those who need motivation to the university Head of Propaganda and encourage them to attend weekly political meetings so they might learn more about the "socialist struggle."

In more serious cases, an unproductive faculty member will go through a series of warnings. First, the unproductive faculty member will be counseled by the academic chairperson. Second, if no improvement is exhibited, he/she will be criticized in writing by the academic chairperson. Third, and only in unusual situations, the faculty member will be penalized financially at the direction of the university administration.

In general terms, the motivation for faculty members to be productive is described as follows. The motivation for younger faculty members is to move up within the academic ranks of the department. This can be achieved by teaching extra courses and serving on committees within the university. Research productivity is more of a consideration in some of the positions. The benefits of such efforts include better housing, higher pay, and aspirations for promotion.

The motivation for older faculty members is a major problem. With pay levels fixed, faculty who have reached higher levels of seniority tend to seek money from sources outside the university. If they can work outside of the university and not have it reported to the university, they can keep all the money. If the university knows of the employment it will receive up to 50% of the additional salary. Thus, older faculty will generally try to teach as little as possible in the university but work as much as possible (off the record) outside of the university. Thus, junior faculty members tend to shoulder more duties within the academic departments.

Promotion of faculty is approved by a research group committee in each department. This committee is comprised of four senior ranking department members. The request for promotion is initiated by the research group committee and "rubber stamp" approval generally follows from the university promotion committee and the Ministry of Railway. Northern Jiaotong University is governed by the Ministry of Railway.

The author observed the aforementioned processes during his periods of teaching at Northern Jiaotong University. By U.S. standards it would seem junior faculty would resent this process but, on the contrary, junior faculty will someday be able to enjoy the aforementioned liberties when they are senior faculty.

This situation is obviously a problem for academic chairpersons to work with. They have control over faculty members well being within the academic department but little, if any, control over faculty pay and termination.

In another area, faculty governance by faculty and academic chairpersons is far less existent compared to the U.S. Zhao Yuguang (not his real name) reports he feels frustrated by restrictions on faculty participation in academic decision making. They are free to express opinions when "alone in the classroom" with students but he reports they have "virtually no say in departmental affairs." He says they don't discuss at university meetings, "There is a speaker. I only have to bring my ears" (Jacobsen, November 4, 1987, p. A-48).

The impact of the cultural revolution (1966-1976) on higher education in China cannot be overstated. It seems to provide a constant referent in China's educational development. One will hear "because of the cultural revolution.... before the cultural revolution..., since the cultural revolution..., or during the cultural revolution...." (Jacobsen, November 4, 1987, p. A-49). Due to it's recency, the cultural revolution has affected everyone at all levels of higher education in China. As time passes perhaps the effects of the cultural revolution, and the persecution of higher education, will diminish.

It is imperative to consider the role of politics in Chinese universities and Chinese society overall. Department chairpersons must consistently consider concerns stressed directly (and indirectly) by the government. Communist party officials exercise considerable influence upon the day-to-day operations within Chinese universities. A department chairperson that

is out of step with political concerns of the government jeopardizes his/her position. The benefits that come with the chairperson position (i.e. better living conditions, travel, telephone service, etc.) are also in jeopardy. These benefits are an important incentive because the salaries are so low most faculty cannot afford more than basic necessities. For instance, the typical Chinese faculty member does not have a home telephone.

Thus, issues such as curriculum development are carried out with a sensitivity toward the political climate. The U. S. political system affords academics (and those that manage them) far more autonomy with curriculum development. The divide between the U. S. and Chinese educational systems is so wide in this area it is difficult to fully convey the role of "political correctness" in the functioning of academic departments. Any formal subject matter that contradicts the views of the government will draw a negative response from the government .

The closest parallel this author can relate the situation to is that of the free press in the U. S. Private newspapers exercise considerable freedom in what they publish (as universities in the U.S. exercise considerable freedom in what they teach). There is a stark comparison however when independent newspapers are compared with base newspapers on military installations. (This author is a military reservist and has exposure to such publications.) Base newspapers are published by, for, about and in support of the military mission (as course content in China is intended to be in support of their "revolutionary struggle"). The base newspaper editor who prints stories contradicting the goals of his/her installation will not be editor very long (just as the academic chairperson who allows the teaching of course content that opposes government views will not be chairperson very long). This situation does not require an extensive list of dos and don'ts. The basic guidelines are "don't rock the boat" and "stay in line."

The political influences that affect curriculum development affect the functioning of departments overall. The curriculum development situation merely exemplifies the role of politics. Thus, departmental decision making, duties of department members, teaching assignments, and departmental governance are guided by a balancing act between what the logical solution to an issue is and what the political ramifications are.

This author has observed "fine lines" that one can sense, get close to, but should not cross. For example, in the spring of 1993 this author taught a seminar series at a university in Beijing on political rhetoric. This seminar series, by coincidence, coincided with the anniversary of the 1989 pro-democracy movement and subsequent crackdown in China. Four visits to China have given this author an appreciation of what is politically appropriate and inappropriate. His sense was it would be okay to lecture on political rhetoric concepts but not use the situation in China as an example (though it exemplified the seminar content quite well). To cross that line, using China as an example, might hinder future invitations to visit that university,

Thus, he was not told what to teach but, since he believed future invitations to visit the university were contingent upon his not criticizing the government, he did not explicitly acknowledge the situation in China one way or the other. Informal conversations with those attending the seminar series leads this author to believe attendees made desired connections between rhetorical theory concepts and reality in China that the author chose not to explicitly state. If a foreigner can sense these "fine lines, native Chinese certainly have a heightened awareness of them and an ability to function within them. This author is interested to see if the aforementioned functioning of departments changes significantly as reforms in China are implemented.

The Chinese educational system, and the society as a whole, is developing rapidly. As international exchanges continue to occur with the United States, in the private and academic sectors, this author is optimistic regarding the benefits that can be realized by both countries. China is adopting many of our technologies and practices. The U.S. is able to learn from

Chinese successes and failures. The much heralded global economy of the future will no doubt be built upon global understanding today. This article is intended as a contribution to that understanding.

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