Reflections on the Developing Civil Service System in China

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The modern civil service system in China began by constructing a legal framework and drafting general regulations to stipulate and enforce conditions about personnel and the administrative system (Jin, 2001). More than eight years have passed since China officially instituted the civil service system on October 1, 1993. Designed to promote socialism in China, the civil service system is also intended to act in the broader interests of social advancement. On the one hand, the modern civil service in China has been hampered by the need to reform the traditional cadre system; on the other, the development of a socialist market-oriented economy has created conditions advantageous to its development. As it continues to develop and improve, the new administrative-personnel management system has demonstrated its advantages over the previous system both in theory and in practice.

Under the traditional cadre personnel system, leaders and staff members at all levels in the Party, state, and mass organizations were closely managed. Such management worked to organize and combine personnel systems in different spheres, including economics, politics and ideological culture, so that these systems could perform their respective functions smoothly (Huang, 2000). Undoubtedly, the traditional personnel system played a key role, economically and socially, in the development of China during the period of central economic planning and revolutionary struggle.

However, since China began pursuing its policy of reform and openness to the world, the traditional system has proven itself incapable of adapting to the current situation. At a meeting of the Thirteenth Party Congress, one leader made clear the drawbacks of the traditional system, saying, "We have long been challenged by two problems: Those younger talents have difficulty in making themselves prominent, and some unhealthy tendencies seem to be always unavoidable in making the best of personnel" (Hou, 1998).

Given the difficulties inherent in the system, people began to develop innovative ideas designed to foster the rule of law and equal opportunity in civil service. As early as 1980, Deng Xiaoping on several occasions stressed the need to reform the traditional cadre personnel system. As he put it, "we are supposed to break with convention and be bound in reforming an untimely organizational and personnel system" (Deng, 1980). Deng Xiaoping also claimed that more young persons were expected to assume positions of leadership, continue to develop in the track of revolution, and broaden the scope of their knowledge beyond specialization (Xu and Li, 2000). Later, reform and reconstruction of the cadre personnel system occurred simultaneously. This resulted, for example, in the elimination of lifetime tenure in leadership, and ensured a stable turnover of power for the third generation of leaders in China.

Abstract: In the 1980s, China began to implement a civil service system to establish a market-oriented economy and foster reform of the politico-administrative system. This modern civil service system was designed to replace the traditional cadre personnel system, which, structured around a centrally planned economy, originated during the period of China’s revolutionary struggles. Focusing on this historical transition, this article explores the relations that persist between the two systems and asks how and why the modern civil service system came into being at this time.
The Need for Change

Economic reform has proven indispensable to fostering changes in China's civil service system. These changes have, in large part, developed out of the transition from a planned economy to a socialist market-oriented economy (Fang and Li, 1998; Chen, 2001). As China began to pursue new economic objectives, many practices inherent in the traditional system have been exposed, failing to adapt to the requirements of a socialist market-oriented economy (Fang, 1997; Zhang, 1997).

First, the excessive role of government inflated the number of working personnel. Under a planned economy, the government not only assumed an excessive economic function, but also intervened in social activity, thereby increasing the need for staff. Not surprisingly, the government's expanded functions resulted in inflated, overstuffed organizations.

Second, insofar as a planned economy does not clearly distinguish between the spheres of government and enterprise, corruption occurred. Economic activity had an administrative style, and many enterprises were not in the light of the regularities of markets, but under restrictions imposed by various sectors of the government. The government took charge of all social resources and could affect economic activity at will. Given the ease with which the government had access to the economy, financial dealing took place on the basis of power relations.

Third, since the government regulated not only economic, but human, resources, qualified personnel often found their professional mobility restricted. During the period of the planned economy, social relations in China were conflated into two basic camps: cadres and masses. While belonging to the former was regarded as honorable, membership in the latter was not. For a long time, enterprise units, institutions and mass organizations set administrative ranks in accordance with those in the Party and government offices. Lacking objective classification, this wholly-unified management encouraged an increasingly administrative style that erased the distinctive features inherent in every occupation. So conceivably, it would be hard to make a real assessment about how respective personnel systems in different sections work.

The traditional personnel system has not only proven unable to adapt to the market economy, but also unable to adjust to the structural changes occasioned by its development (Yang, 1997).

First, the socialist, market-oriented economy streamlines organizations and promotes mobility, thereby enabling qualified personnel to find appropriate positions. This improved administrative efficiency has provided a foundation for the emergence of a modern civil service system in China. Admittedly, in the past, vicious cycles of organizational reform occurred because the government manipulated enterprises directly and developed an elaborate and strict division of enterprises. At present, the government must streamline administration and transfer power to lower levels. Furthermore, owing to the role of the market mechanism and the principle of initial mutual choice, a change in industrial structures leads to a deepening differentiation of every occupation and more mobility of human resources, which have both built a good social foundation for a group of prospective civil servants with high ability.

Second, the socialist market-oriented economy facilitates the implementation and development of the rule of law. In other words, the special interests of administrators have been challenged as a consequence of concrete, written rules and regulations. That is, the phenomena of inflated authority in administrative occupations can be kept under control. Thus, implementation of the rule of law achieves better performance and, consequently, saves operating costs.

Third, the socialist market-oriented economy, which prioritizes efficiency, ensures that the scale of government functions remains appropriate. In this regard the civil service system displays its full significance and is scientifically justified. It is believed that only appropriate-scale societies can mobilize individuals to seek their best interests, effectively utilize the market mecha-
anism, and at the same time eliminate its inherent defects. Put briefly, it would seem that, as both prerequisite and guarantee, civil servants must remain honest to restrain bureaucracy and prevent corruption.

A Brief History of Civil Service Reform in China

Significantly, the civil service system is only one part of a broader personnel system. In fact, it comprises two different categories, with the latter having a wider implication.

Implementation of the civil service system has provided a channel through which to reform the traditional personnel system and resolve the problem of personnel management in governmental organizations. In comparison, reform of personnel systems in other fields has proceeded more slowly. Indeed, the civil service system may actually define the direction for future efforts at reform (Hou, 1998).

In light of the above, in the mid 1980s, China began to explore the possibility of establishing its own civil service system. At first, the civil service system entered the agenda by building on preliminary reforms carried out in the years immediately after 1978. In 1985, The National Functionaries’ Law was drawn up; later, it was renamed The Provisional Regulations of National Functionaries in Administrative Organs. In 1987, a central summit meeting issued a statement about the new system. Later, there came a period of practical experimentation in selected sections and areas. In 1989, six sections of the State Council took the lead in experimenting with the civil service system. By the next year, the same experiments were conducted at the local administrative level in the cities of Ha Erbin and Shenzhen.

These experiments aimed at providing helpful experience, popularizing the new system in both the central and local administrative organizations. By 1993, The Provisional Regulations of Civil Service were formally issued (Tian, 1998). At that time, it was suggested that the new system be established across the country with-

in an average of three years, then be continually updated, refined, and improved.

Up to now, China has made great strides toward the construction of its civil service system. Guided by the Provisional Regulations of Civil Service, the basic conceptual framework has been established, including an almost complete system of about 40 separate regulations and enforcement stipulations. Moreover, the State Council and each local governmental organization above the county level have classified positions, and the identities of existing staff members have been converted from cadre to civil servant.

Meanwhile, certain kinds of basic operating mechanisms have gradually come into being. For instance, when recruiting new civil servants it has become commonplace to select the most qualified through public examination. Competition among civil servants in leadership positions has infused new vigor and vitality into the system as a whole (Ren, 1999). The principles of “publicity, equality, competition, and qualifications” help to improve methods by which to assess the efficiency of civil servants’ work. Merit has become the basis of promotion. These mechanisms work to guarantee the honest performance of official duties and transparency in public affairs. From the outset, then, attempts to establish a civil service system have improved both the abilities of civil servants and the structure of human resources.

Characteristics of the New System

As previously mentioned, the civil service system has never operated in a vacuum; rather, it has emerged in close relation to the previous cadre personnel system, the influence of which must be taken into account. It is the relation between these two systems that accounts for the ongoing vitality and innovative spirit of civil service in China.

When traced to its source, the current system indeed derives from the previous system, one that remains a
distinguishing feature of contemporary civil service in China (Xu, 1993; Tian, 1993; Li, 1997).

First, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has established a new basic line, under the guidance of Deng’s theory, that all current tasks should center on economic development, adhere to the Four Cardinal Principles, and pursue a policy of opening the country and the world. Despite this drastic shift in working focus, the CPC maintains its position as the central authority in affairs of state and society. As an indispensable part of the CPC’s organizational work, the civil service system necessarily serves the Party’s guiding principles and political lines as formulated during the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee. Hence, it is important to bear in mind that the CPC’s basic line definitively functions as the guiding principle behind the civil service system as it did towards the previous cadre personnel system.

Second, the principle of Party control is fundamental to the traditional cadre personnel system and to the new civil service system (Zhang et al., 1994; Huang, 2000). Since the CPC was founded, this principle has proven indispensable to the Party and cannot be discarded. As a component of the Party’s cadre personnel system, the civil service system continues to develop under the direction of this principle. Ideally, the modern system should at all times function in support of the Party’s ruling position and work to reinforce the corresponding organizations’ leadership in every respect. Therefore, in the context of the civil service system, the principle that the Party is in charge of the cadres continues central.

Of course, the demands that result from recent changes will affect the principle of Party control. After all, under the new circumstances, the need to simultaneously strengthen and improve the Party’s leadership is confronted with unprecedented challenges from all corners. Put another way, if the Party’s ruling methods do not improve, it will be difficulty for the Party to maintain its leadership (Zhou, 1994). With regard to the practice of the civil service system, the principle of CPC control over cadres today differs from that which prevailed during the period of revolutionary struggles. Therefore, when applying the new civil service system, it needs to be stood correctly.

It is supposed to exert itself in a more general sense, namely, attach more importance to manage personnel to the macro level, which results in guaranteeing the Party’s policies are clearly reflected and effectively implemented. Specifically speaking, each regulation should function in accordance with the Party’s cadre policy.

Furthermore, the corresponding Party Committee should recommend and verify governmental members at all levels. These members, in turn, are either elected or appointed by respective organs of power. Moreover, the Party Committees are responsible for the supervision of Party members among civil servants; with regard to non-governmental members in important posts, the Party Committee may also directly supervise when necessary. Ultimately, the principle of Party control over cadres deserves considerably more attention than can be accomplished in the context of a single article (Kong, 2001; Chen, 2000).

Third, the modern Chinese civil service operates by adhering to the standard of appointing people with both ability and political integrity to the proper positions. Such a principle can be better understood when combined with the first two principles. Moreover, the basis of appointment has taken form in the long procession of socialist revolution, construction, and reform, and has proven effective in selecting and employing qualified cadres. Specifically, “political integrity” primarily involves political thinking and character of virtue, while “ability” mainly means technical and professional skills. Candidates should possess both qualities simultaneously, but neither should be emphasized at the expense of the other. Those who preside over choosing the right person should act objectively and give no consideration to close or distant, familial or social relationships with the job candidates. For a long time, appointing people on the basis of merit was also
a basic principle of the cadre personnel system. Moreover, leaders of the civil service system in China have built on the lessons learned from the previous system; the civil service system continues to maintain a merit standard of selecting and employing personnel. In this regard, civil servants ought to be employed and ranked on the basis of both ability and political integrity. Along with political integrity, ability, diligence, and merit, the future system is expected to be comprehensive. When transferred to new posts, it is the civil servants’ responsibility to meet the qualifications — mainly those related to ability and political integrity — requisite for tenure.

Fourth, the Chinese civil service system operates on the principal of serving the people whole-heartedly. Governments at all levels in China have been appropriately called people’s governments. Whether in positions of leadership or not, and independent of how they assume their offices, civil servants at all levels in China work as public servants ready to satisfy practical needs of the majority of people. All civil servants are supposed to perform their official duties with ardor, dedication, and honesty. Rather than pursue private ends, they are expected to subject themselves to the supervision of the masses, be willing to share wealth and woe, and, in the spirit of self-sacrifice, be the first to bear hardship and the last to enjoy comfort.

In this way, civil servants, especially those in charge of people, property, and products, must keep in mind that their authority derives from the people. This principle of civil service, which has its roots in old and worthy traditions, reminds us that in China civil servants (when following both ancient tradition and modern practice) never see themselves in terms of their own interests, as employees of the government, as often occurs in Western societies (Tian, 1998).

Fifth, the civil service adheres to a classification system based on Chinese characteristics. In China, there does not exist a multi-party system, and the civil servants must not be neutral when handling political issues. Chinese civil servants do not follow the international practice of distinguishing between administrative execution and vocational expertise. In certain other countries, of course, there is a fine line between “political affairs officials” and “routine affairs officials.” However, the classification system in China differs from both the mode of “classification on the basis of office post” and the mode of “classification on the basis of individual grade” which prevail in the west. It stands out as a model that prioritizes “classification on the basis of office post” simultaneously in combination with “classification on the basis of individual grade.” Namely, it takes account of traditional individual qualifications or grade factors with the prerequisite of scientifically defining the office positions. This approach, together with the standard that appoints people on the basis of political integrity and ability, has been generally accepted and recognized in China since ancient times. All Chinese civil servants are expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the requirements outlined by the Party and government; they are expected to be skilled at both political affairs and vocational work, both ideologically grounded and professionally proficient.

Compared with the traditional cadre personnel system, the civil service system in China has not only inherited many traditions, but has also developed distinctive features to meet current needs related to reforming the political-administrative system and developing a socialist market-economy.

First, the civil service system has developed the practice of a classified management system based on scientific definitions of job scope. This countermeasure avoids the practices associated with traditional, highly centralized personnel management systems. As mentioned above, all cadres in the past were managed without taking into account their differences or unique talents, making it difficult for them to demonstrate their abilities. It also encouraged bureaucratization and even provoked serious corruption in the management of employees. In view of these points, a classified management system based on scientific definitions of scope
can be regarded as the primary character differentiating it from the previous cadre system. Previously, cadres in national organs, together with administrative cadres and persons in charge of enterprises and public utilities, were all considered components of the framework of "cadres." In addition to those from national government bodies, cadres in national organs also include staff members from the national organs of power, judicial organs, procurement organizations, the CPC and democratic party organizations, the bodies of the Trade Union, the Communist Youth League, the Women's Federation and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

After careful assessment, those classified as civil servants consist only of staff members in government organizations at all levels, except office attendants. For the present, although personnel in other national organizations are run in accordance with the civil service system, they still do not belong to the sphere of civil servants. As for the cadres in enterprise and public utilities institutions, they are not involved in practicing the civil service system and would be managed according to the nature of their own circles. Thus, the establishment of a civil service system leads to both new personnel management in national administrative organizations, and an attempt to introduce a classified management system for all personnel.

Second, the civil service system fosters competition and inspires job performance assessment. The previous system lacked vigor and vitality due to the absence of competition. It was generally accepted that it made no difference whether one worked well or badly, a perspective that dampened enthusiasm and encouraged the habit of drifting along aimlessly at work. Hence, the need for an inspiring mechanism, a spirit of competition that encourages civil servants from the moment they enter management and extends to other key moments in their careers. Those who hold non-leadership posts, ranked below a section chief, must have taken public examinations, competed on an equal footing and been closely checked. Only those candidates who are outstanding can be admitted into the civil servants group. At the same time, in employing some civil servants who assume leading offices, ranked as deputy directors of departments or bureaus at the provincial level, many sections and units also give public examinations and select the most qualified.

As mentioned, although the civil servants' "follow-up system" has a broad sphere, "merit" is given priority. The annual follow-up rates civil servants' performance as either excellent, competent, or incompetent. Rewards and punishment, additional training, and wages are influenced by follow-up ratings. Civil servants can only be promoted to higher office with a positive or "competent" assessment of ability, practical merit and political integrity. In some cases, personnel whose performance has been outstanding or "excellent" can even be promoted more than one grade at one time. Now, survival of the fittest, in the fullest sense, requires that civil servants assume responsibility for the posts they receive.

Third, the civil service system cultivates a practice called "the metabolism mechanism." This mechanism counters practices remaining from the cadre system, where officials were guaranteed nearly lifelong tenure. Officials could be promoted but not demoted, resulting in leaders who always seemed to be too old for their offices and duties. In the absence of a retiring mechanism, it was generally believed that, unless they made serious mistakes, cadres members kept their offices for life. Dismissing incompetent cadres was virtually impossible. Moreover, when cadres reached the prescribed age of retirement, they often did not retire conscientiously from their posts. It was not uncommon to see government bodies drastically exceed their authorized size and become overstuffed.

With the infusion of "the metabolism mechanism," the civil servants group is replenished in a timely manner by drawing on a pool of talented personnel who have met the strict entrance qualifications. Simultaneously, the group is refreshed by new recruitment and promotion to different posts. The metabolism mechanism also ensures the enforcement of rules and
regulations regarding retirement, resignation, dismissal, and expulsion. Generally speaking, those reaching the prescribed ages are required to retire from their posts; those unwilling to assume offices are approved for resignation; and those incompetent are dismissed or expelled. In addition, the civil service system explicitly stipulates strict age limitations as well as limits on the size of each government organization (Sun and Zhu, 2001).

Fourth, the civil service system uses “guarantees” for conscientious and honest performance of official duties. This mechanism counters passivity and corruption that too often characterized the civil service in the past. In the period of transition from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy some persons avail themselves of the loopholes inherent in an imperfect institutional framework. Either they attend work but do not really exert themselves, or they promote corruption in various ways, such as by accepting bribes. Their conduct has greatly damaged the positive image of the Party and government in the eyes of the masses, and their conduct has even aroused discontent. As a result, reforms underlying the movement to a socialist, market-oriented economy, use the guaranteeing mechanism for conscientious and honest performance of official duties. As a basic requirement, the civil service system governs civil servants’ rights and obligations, rewards and disciplinary sanctions, recruitment and selection, and promotion and “follow-up.” For example, open examinations, strict follow-up systems and regular training compel civil servants to work arduously to improve service and efficiency. In turn, proficiency rises substantially.

As well, formulations about civil servants’ regular rotating posts make sense. All civil servants should work honestly and impartially for the public interest. Conduct that involves corruption, embezzling, offering or accepting bribes, exploiting one’s office to pursue private ends (such as setting up enterprises, or running other profitable affairs) is prohibited. Those who challenge the law by engaging in such practices risk stern punishment.

Despite advances made in establishing a legal framework, there still exist practices that continue to hamper implementation of the regulations.

Fifth, the civil service system operates by rules rather than by a tradition of “rule by outstanding personality,” a feature of the previous cadre personnel system. Since the previous civil service system lacked a set of institutionalized regulations enforced by laws, it encouraged a kind of willful subjectivity that became almost insurmountable. It is hoped that the new civil service system, strengthened by written regulations, will continue to transform existing, anachronistic practices.

Besides the general law, The Provisional Regulations of Civil Service, dozens of individual regulations and stipulations for enforcement of rules have come into being. In the future, a formal Civil Service Law and other related stipulations will also be issued. At present, a complete set of laws and regulations is in place to make sure that all arrangements comply with the proper rules and, consequently, act to enhance the legal framework of the civil service system.

Conclusion

As China moves away from the traditional cadre personnel system, leaders have analyzed the experiences of other countries and introduced innovations that ensure a bright future for a civil service system with Chinese characteristics. Admittedly, the civil service system has been in practice for a relatively short period of time in China. The current system, which has been governed by “The Provisional Regulations of Civil Service” for about ten years, is expected to be replaced by “The Civil Service Law” in the near future, further strengthening the system with a legally binding national general law.

Despite advances made in establishing a legal framework, there still exist practices that continue to hamper implementation of the regulations. Serious attention must be paid to the practice of each separate regulation and operating systems. For instance, the
newly developed position-classification system — an important feature of a modern civil service system — faces great difficulty when applied in China. It has bearings on many other subtle and complicated factors, which indeed are of much significance in instituting scientific and rational personnel management. The existing classification system (which essentially distinguishes only between leaders and staff) requires significant refinement in order to embody more detailed specialization.

Furthermore, public competition should expand to wider spheres and encompass a broader spectrum of positions. When recruiting candidates, both the form and content of the examination can be greatly improved. As for the inspiring mechanism, it seems too general to adequately regulate follow-up and evaluate performance. Modern technology to assess performance is vital to improved practice. Not only are the lines between “excellent,” “competent,” and “incompetent” fuzzy, but results of the follow-up assessment are often disregarded when considering promotions. Something must be done to make a noticeable correction and improvement.

It is perhaps even more important to bear in mind that the civil service system in China has by no means appeared or developed in isolation from the world or from Chinese tradition. Rather, the unique way the civil service system is developing has led to a successful reform of personnel management during the transition from a cadre system to a modern civil service. Needless to say, the development and practice of the new civil service system will encounter obstacles in unresolved issues in the larger reform of economic and politico-administrative systems (Sun, 1998).

It is now well recognized that the key to reforming administrative management lies in the real transformation of the government’s functions, from producer to governor of the economy. Mere surface changes can only result in vicious cycles that accomplish little and prevent genuine reform in civil service from being implemented. In an important way, civil service reform and development will occur within the limits set by the Party. As of now, in the context of personnel system development, the future is unclear. Without a distinctive division of functions between the Party and the government, few will be convinced that the traditional personnel system can change substantially.

In summary, as part of a broader framework of reform strategies, the civil service system in China remains dynamic. It will continue to follow the transition toward a mature socialist-market oriented economy.

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References


