

SYMPOSIUM

Crowding Out Meritocracy? – Cultural Constraints in Chinese Public Human Resource Management

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This paper seeks cultural explanations of the pervasive norm violations against the principle of meritocracy in Chinese public human resource management especially at local levels. It reveals that a bureaucratic culture of patrimonial individualism, including favouritism, nepotism, localism, and factionalism prevailing within Chinese officialdom as the ethos, value, psychological disposition, and behavioural orientation of civil servants, has undermined the development in China of a modern meritocracy-based civil service system. With 14 case studies, this research demonstrates that the Chinese civil service institutions, derived from an opposite culture of hierarchical collectivism, failed to address the cultural constraints over the implementation of the meritocracy principle. The conceptual framework, as well as the case findings, points to legislative and policy reforms in China that would address the problems derived from the unique Chinese bureaucratic culture through further institutional design and capacity building.

Key words: *Chinese civil service, meritocracy, bureaucratic culture, public human resource management, cultural theory*

Meritocracy is essential to a modern bureaucracy and public administration. Northcote and Trevelyan (1854), Wilson (1887), Goodnow (1900), and Weber (1946) all advocated that politics and administration must be separated to ensure an efficient executive branch of government. Correspondingly, in civil service management, the political patronage or spoils system must be eliminated and replaced with a merit system. Merit or achievement, implying political neutrality and impartiality of administrators, as the primary criterion in recruitment, selection, and promotion of civil servants, has become a central doctrine of modern public administration (Kaufman 1956).

During the reform era since late 1970s, China has made significant progress in promoting meritocracy in its public human resource management (HRM). Some scholars argue that Chinese civil service reforms in the past two decades and more can be summarized as the advent of the merit system (Burns 2007; Chow

1991; Lam and Chan 1996). Others even attributed the survival of the Chinese communist regime after the 1989 tragedy largely to the authoritarian resilience characterized with increased meritocracy (Nathan 2003). Indeed, the core of civil service reforms (or even more broadly the administrative reforms) in China is solely related to the increasing advancement of meritocracy.

Nevertheless, the past 20 years (starting with the *Provisional Regulation of State Civil Servants* promulgated in 1993, which marks the beginning of a modern civil service system in communist China) also witnessed that the principle of meritocracy or the efforts to build up a modern civil service based upon meritocracy has frequently been compromised and undermined. Some ascribed this to a systemic flaw in the Chinese civil service institution that lacks a concept of political neutrality or neutral competence (Chan 2010; Chan and Li 2007). Without a ‘neat’ definition of meritocracy,

considerable room has been left for manipulating the criteria of merit (Burns 2006). Yet this line of research did not explain a strong disposition found among Chinese bureaucrats to exploit the institutional loopholes and weaken the principle of meritocracy for private gains in the daily operation of the civil service.

This research adopts a cultural perspective to examine behavioural determinants of Chinese approaches to public HRM including with regard to 'merit'. Each country's approach to public HRM reflects its unique political and cultural context. Perry (2010) pointed out one of the strategic agenda items in public HRM is to examine the cultural and political context. A cultural perspective, therefore, can shed light on the unique problems facing Chinese civil service management particularly concerning the principle of meritocracy.

Focusing on bureaucratic culture, this paper defines it in the domain of public HRM as the general psychological disposition or orientation of civil servants (Pye and Verba 1965) toward the acceptance of the principle of meritocracy. Actors do not respond directly to structural situations but respond to them through mediating dispositions or orientation (Eckstein 1988). In other words, in public HRM, the acceptance of and the adherence to the principle of meritocracy by civil servants are conditioned and mediated through their disposition and orientation, namely their culture or their ways of life.

This paper asks the following questions: What are the key cultural factors that constrain the implementation of the meritocracy principle in Chinese public HRM especially at the local levels? How do these factors influence the acceptance of the meritocracy principle among Chinese civil servants? How do Chinese civil service institutions address these cultural forces? The central arguments of this paper are that some facets of the Chinese bureaucratic culture, as a prevailing disposition and orientation among civil servants, defined as an individualism culture, undermine the principle of meritocracy in Chinese public HRM. The Chinese civil service institutions, derived from a contradictory culture of hierarchism, fail to effectively address these cultural constraints.

The analysis draws upon multiple sources. Case studies, news reports, secondary data analysis, and literature are applied to identify these cultural constraints. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. It first reviews briefly the historical evolution of meritocracy in China with a focus on its development in the reform era. After a literature review on the studies of meritocracy in Chinese civil service, it proceeds to construct a conceptual framework to apprehend the cultural constraints in Chinese public HRM. The fifth section validates the conceptual framework with 14 recent cases. It concludes with some policy recommendations to address these cultural constraints.

Meritocracy in China – A Historical Review

China is perhaps the first country that adopted the principle of meritocracy in civil service management. The practice of meritocracy can be traced back to the Han dynasty about 2000 years ago (Creel 1964). After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, China copied a cadre management system from the Soviet Union with a *nomenklatura* system in particular for leading positions in all agencies. Under such a system, virtually all public officials were categorized as state cadres. The Communist Party, with its Committees and Organization Departments at various hierarchical levels, controlled the cadre recruitments as well as leadership appointments (Burns 1987; Manion 1985). This cadre management system, however, was problematic – causing decay of capacity, efficiency, and effectiveness of the Chinese bureaucracy (Burns 2007). One important reason was that the criteria for recruitment, selection, and promotion of cadres and leaders, though varied over time, overwhelmingly emphasized class background, political line adherence, and party loyalty. Meritocracy was an alien concept to the Chinese cadre management system in pre-reform era.

Since the outset of economic reforms, China has sought to address these problems through establishing meritocracy as the basic principle of public HRM. As early as 1980, Deng Xiaoping instructed that the cadre corps must

achieve four transformations (*sihua*), that is, the cadres should become more revolutionary, younger, better educated, and professionally more competent (Nathan 2003). The latter three transformations all emphasized meritocracy as the target of cadre system reforms. Starting from 1993 with the promulgation of the *Provisional Regulations on State Civil Servants*, reforms directed to achieve meritocracy were accelerated. The *Regulations* established the principle of meritocracy for recruitment (chapter 4), performance appraisal (chapter 5), recognition and award (chapter 6), and promotion (chapter 8) of civil servants. The *Civil Servant Law of the PRC*, which was put in effect on 1 January 2006, further reaffirmed a meritocracy-oriented, competitive, and open civil service system.

Notwithstanding the adoption of the meritocracy principle, Chinese public HRM has still been characterized with two salient non-meritocratic features. First, institutionally, there is no concept of political neutrality or neutral competence underlying the principle of meritocracy (Burns 2007; Chan and Li 2007; Lam and Chan 1996). In fact, the first principle of the Chinese civil service system is that the party manages cadres (*dang guan ganbu*). ‘Within such a system, only adherence to party tenets permits upward mobility. Impartial competence is secondary to political allegiance in the PRC’ (Chan and Li 2007: 394). China practices meritocracy without political neutrality. Second, consequently, at the operational level, the principle of meritocracy has repeatedly been undermined especially by those in leading positions able to exercise authority as if their views represent party policies or decisions. In other words, those universal rules of public HRM have not been well accepted and respected or strictly observed and adhered to by officials with many continuing improper and illegal practices (Burns and Wang 2010; Heberer and Trappel 2013; Sun 2008).

Prior Literature

There have been broadly two streams of scholarship on meritocracy in Chinese public

HRM: institutional examination of meritocracy and empirical assessment of how much merit weighs in career advancement of Chinese bureaucrats. Manion (1985) is perhaps one of the pioneers who noticed the increased importance of merit in the new cadre evaluation scheme announced in early 1980s. Burns (1989) and Chan (2004) documented the reforms of the *Nomenklatura* system in 1984, 1990, and 1998, revealing a fundamental contradiction inherent in the reforms: to maintain the centralized party control over leading cadres and to decentralize *Nomenklatura* to further economic development with shifting emphasis on performance and technical qualifications of cadres. Since the promulgation of the *Provisional Regulation of State Civil Servants* in 1993, many scholars turned to examine the implications and impacts of the new civil service institution. According to Lam and Chan (1996), the fundamental feature of the newly introduced civil service system was still the emphasis on party loyalty and the continuing dominance of the party’s *Nomenklatura* system. After the *Civil Service Law* was approved in 2005, Chan and Li (2007) pointed out that, compared to the 1993 *Regulation*, the *Law* actually further politicized the civil service system with greater leverage for the party to control the civil service.

The institutional analyses highlight that the principle of meritocracy has always been secondary to the institutional priority of party primacy over the civil service. Accordingly, the empirical studies focus on examining the weight given to merit in the career mobility of Chinese bureaucrats. Basically, they contrast the significance of merit with party loyalty and informal connections, *guanxi*, in career advancement.

Walder (1995) and his associates (Li and Walder 2001; Walder et al. 2000) identified a pattern of dual career paths for two distinct Chinese elites. One path requires both educational and political credentials (party membership) and leads to administrative elites, who were systematically rewarded with political career advancement. The other path requires only educational credentials and leads to professional elites, without equivalent political rewards. Thus they concluded that

‘the enforcement of meritocratic principles has not been permitted to interfere with principles of party loyalty’ (p. 205).

Other scholars compared merit (measured as economic performance in most studies) with *guanxi* in determining career mobility. Li and Zhou (2005) found that both economic performance and personal connections facilitate career advancement for provincial leaders. Choi (2012) also found similarly supportive evidences. Shih et al. (2012) found that factional ties, educational qualifications, and provincial revenue collection all play substantial roles in elite rankings among CCP Central Committee Members. Landry (2008) found that merit matters in the promotion of mayors. Lin (2012) found only meritocratic qualifications increase the promotion speed of those prefecture-level mayors. Nevertheless, Opper et al. (2012) cast doubt on the findings of performance-based promotion. Their evidence shows that factional ties are an important predictor of leadership promotion, whereas merits such as university education and economic performance play an insignificant role.

The existing literature on meritocracy is not without limitations. First, the institutional analysis neglects the behavioural outcomes of the biased civil service system. It adopts a static perspective and is thus inattentive to the dynamic process of how the emphasis on party supremacy opens opportunities for leaders, in the name of the party manages cadres as if they represent the party, manipulate and abuse the principle of meritocracy to serve individualistic interests. The institutional approach ignores the cultural roots beneath the behavioural orientation of Chinese bureaucrats. Second, though the empirical studies of Chinese meritocracy have paid attentions to the roles of cultural factors in Chinese public HRM, they fail to map a complete picture of these factors. Data reduction in quantitative research sacrifices the rich and subtle substance and nuance of the subject. For instance, Lin’s study (2012) attempts to grasp as many of the cultural factors as possible by including factionalism, nepotism, and localism in the regression analysis. However, all these factors are only defined and measured as a dummy variable, losing much of

the rich content and variety of the bureaucratic culture.

To summarize, the cultural forces, underlying the corrupt, illegitimate, and manoeuvring behaviours of Chinese bureaucrats, which damaged the principle of meritocracy, have been under-examined. This research aims to address these gaps by presenting a conceptual framework to explore possible cultural explanations for these bureaucrats’ disposition and behaviours that conflict with the principle of meritocracy in Chinese public HRM.

Conceptual Framework

A cultural approach has been widely adopted in political and policy analysis (Hood 1998; Thompson et al. 1990). Cultural theory was mainly developed by Pye (1965), Douglas (1970), Wildavsky (1987, 1989), and Thompson (1982).

The Group-Grid Theory of Culture

Cultural theory is based on two dimensions: ‘group’ and ‘grid’, to distinguish four basic patterns of social relations. The ‘group’ dimension refers to the strength of the ties between an individual and others (the group) and the extent to which group decisions bind individuals. The ‘grid’ dimension refers to the number or variety of external prescriptions to which an individual is subject or the degree to which an individual is circumscribed or prescribed by external social norms or rules (Douglas 1970). Therefore, ‘the strength or weakness of group boundaries and the numerous or few, varied or similar, prescriptions binding or freeing individuals are the components of their culture’ (Wildavsky 1987: 6).

The intersection of these two dimensions leads to four patterns of social relations and preferences: the culture or ways of life. The culture with high group and high grid is termed ‘hierarchical collectivism’. In contrast, ‘competitive individualism’ is the term for the culture with low group and low grid. The way of life that combines high group but low grid is labelled ‘egalitarian sectarianism’. ‘Apathetic

fatalism' is where there is low group but high grid (Hood 1998; Peters 2010). Within the culture of hierarchical collectivism, individuals are in various hierarchically arranged positions that are subject to group control. People are also heavily bound by a large number of norms, rules, and obligations associated with those positions. In the culture of competitive individualism, an individual's life is characterized by self-regulation with weak subordination to social relations or groups. The roles each individual assumes, as well as their related social prescriptions, are temporary and subject to negotiation. The culture of egalitarian sectarianism imposes clear group boundaries but few rules and obligations on individuals. Hence the culture is formed with a lack of authority but with strong group affiliation. Within the culture of apathetic fatalism, an individual is subject to many social prescriptions but cannot derive sufficient protection or power from any group (Douglas 1970).

Culture and Institutions

Culture and institutions mutually influence each other (Harrison and Huntington 2000; Weber 2001). Culture shapes people's institutional preference. Institutions frame people's cultural inclinations and behavioural orientations (Hood 1998; Wildavsky 1987). Pye (1968) noted that Chinese political culture is characterized by a contradiction between, on the one hand, the emphasis on hierarchical conformity commanded by the political institutions and, on the other hand, the private search of bureaucrats for individualistic interests through particularistic ties of *guanxi*. In the language of the grid-group cultural theory, the Chinese civil service system is featured with two opposite cultures: hierarchical collectivism and competitive individualism. On the one hand, the system attempts to impose a culture of hierarchical collectivism in which civil servants are subject to the dictates of the institutional structure. If necessary, their individual interests shall be sacrificed to the collective needs. That is, this official culture is featured with high grid and high group. Ultimately, this imposed culture is to serve the supremacy of CCP to control the

civil service system. On the other hand, however, Chinese bureaucrats are in effect dominated by a culture of competitive individualism with low group and low grid. First, rather than be identified primarily as a member affiliated with the corps of civil servants, Chinese bureaucrats tend and prefer to be incorporated into informal groups based on personal connections, *guanxi* (Guo 2001; Pye 1968). The strength of the official group, namely the corps of civil servants, is therefore relatively weak *vis-a-vis* that of the informal primary group in binding individual bureaucrats. Second, despite numerous and strict rules and obligations prescribed by the civil service system, Chinese bureaucrats share a strong propensity to pay lip service with feigned compliance to these formal rules and even laws (Pye 1988), and may often engage in illegitimate activities. That is, individual Chinese bureaucrats are not tightly bound by those formal rules and obligations either. Riggs (1964) noted the low-group and low-grid culture is typical in 'prismatic society' full of formalities in the enforcement of rules and laws.

Consequently, the Chinese civil service institutions, derived from a culture of hierarchical collectivism to materialize the values and priorities of the ruling party to preserve its supremacy, failed to address the problems stemming from the individualism culture dominating Chinese bureaucrats. The imperative of conformity demanded by the regime in effect denies the individualistic self-interest. Indeed, individualism is a taboo in official Chinese political culture (Pye 1968). It thus rules out serious efforts in institutional design to regulate illegitimate private behaviours and private relationships of bureaucrats, leaving room for manoeuvring strategies by position holders who frequently violated the principle of meritocracy in Chinese public HRM.

The Means-Ends Schema

Merton's means-ends theory (1968) further accounts for why norm violations occur amidst conformist culture. His theory suggests that illegitimate or deviant individual behaviour is motivated by social pressures. According to

Merton, all social systems define cultural goals and interests as legitimate objectives for all members of society. 'They are things worth striving for' (1968: 187), that is status, prestige, and wealth. Meanwhile, the cultural structures also set institutionalized means (i.e. norms) to attain those goals. Individuals attaining cultural goals through socially accepted means are conformists. Highly aspired goals are generally binding with more-competitive legitimate means. In various civil service systems, for example, the position of bureaucrat is a culturally desired goal. Hence the means to enter the civil service is restricted and competitive, subject to heavy regulation and requiring high meritocratic qualifications, leading to a more exclusive and narrower structure of opportunities.

Consequently, not all seekers of culturally acclaimed goals have the equal access to the opportunity structure to attain those goals, due to their lack of qualifications and resources. Lipset and Lenz (2000) pointed out that many achievement markets such as the civil service are inherently organized so as to create a large gap between demand for goals and supply of means. Accordingly, those who realize early on that they have little access to socially legitimate means will reject the norms and replace them with unconventional means. Durkheim calls it 'anomie' and Merton defines it as 'deviance'. In particular, Merton notes that, if means and ends are not highly integrated, that is the social emphasis on success-goals has no equivalent emphasis through institutional means, so that, norm violations and illegitimate means are more tolerable culturally, this results in demoralization or deinstitutionalization of the means.

Amoral Familism

Another theoretical framework, the amoral familism (Banfield 1958), explains why violations in public HRM are always directed to serve the interests of primary group members. It suggests that norm violations are largely an expression of particularism – 'the felt obligation to help, to give resources to persons to whom one has personal obligation, to the family above all but also to friends and membership groups. Nepotism is its most visible expression'

(Lipset and Lenz 2000: 119). Particularism emphasizes unique circumstance. The opposite of particularism is universalism, a commitment of equally applying common standards and rules to all. Banfield names such a particularism as 'amoral familism' (1958), in which 'little loyalty to the larger community or acceptance of behavioral norms that require support of others. Hence, familism is amoral, gives rise to corruption, and fosters deviance from norms of universalism and *merit*. Anything goes that advances the interests of one's self and family' (Lipset and Lenz 2000: 119–120). Amoral familism is pervasive in traditional China (Fei 1947).

We term this ethos, values, psychological disposition, and behavioral orientation among Chinese civil servants as a *bureaucratic culture with prismatic characteristics*. First, it is an individualism culture in terms of its low group boundary and low rule binding. Within such a culture, bureaucrats have a dominant disposition tending to circumvent formal rules and put their own interest first. Second, it is a familism-oriented culture deeply rooted in Chinese tradition, characterized with patrimonial, patriarchal, personalized primary social relations prevalent among bureaucrats. Hence this culture can be more precisely defined as patrimonial individualism or familial individualism. Third, the existing civil service institutions failed to address the discrepancy between the prescribed formal rules, deriving from a hierarchical culture that prioritizes the primacy of the ruling party over the civil service system, and the familial individualism oriented values and behaviours among bureaucrats. Fourth, such a culture has been reinforced by the disintegrated ends and means structure inherent in Chinese civil service institutions that do not emphasize meritocracy as the paramount criterion or supreme means.

Based on existing literature, this research identifies four types of Chinese bureaucratic culture: favouritism (Burns 2006), nepotism (Feng 2010), localism (Goodman 2000), and factionalism (Hillman '2010). 'Favouritism' refers to particularistic calculation and manoeuvre by individual bureaucrats in manipulating social relations to seek favourable

treatment in public HRM. ‘Nepotism’ denotes particularism granted to friends and relatives. It is mainly based on family ties. ‘Localism’ means informal cliques formed through personal affiliations and loyalty stemming from the same milieu such as one’s village, county, province, or common experiences (Dreyer 2006). ‘Factionalism’ implies relatively organized but not fully corporatized groups of political actors based on ‘clientelist ties’ (Nathan 1973). Factions are formed essentially through constant exchange of favours that leads to a relationship involving unwritten but nonetheless well-understood rights and obligations between patrons and clients.

These four types of bureaucratic culture are not perfectly mutually exclusive. For example, actors might seek favouritism through localism. Localism is also an important basis for factionalism. Nevertheless, they are still differentiated and sufficiently independent of each other in terms of their degree of organization, scope, negative impact on meritocracy, and the risk to be identified or exposed as shown in Table 1. Our major hypotheses or propositions are also summarized in Table 1. Favouritism is cultivated in the daily interactions among individual civil servants. Its scope is thus widespread. As it is a common practice, relatively speaking, favouritism only marginally challenges the principle of meritocracy due to its weakest group boundary and obligation. Nepotism, especially those based on family ties, is also commonplace in Chinese officialdom. The special strength of kinship motivates bureaucrats to substantially weaken the meritocracy rule. Nonetheless, violating the meritocracy rule in the interest of family members is risky as kinship can be easily detected and recognized. Localism has been a long tradition in Chinese official circles. Social relations derived from localism are rather stable and formalized. Factionalism is rare as it requires a high level of organization. Generally, it is difficult especially for outsiders to monitor factionalism or localism because of their closed nature. Hillman (2010) indicates that factionalism and localism sometimes can be supplementary to the rule of meritocracy, because localism- and particularly factionalism-based groups tend to

nominate their most able members to compete for office posts.

Case Findings and Discussions

This study employs case studies as its main research method, supplemented with secondary document analysis. The case studies have generally been selected through an information-oriented sampling method (Yin 2014). A total of 20 cases violating the principle of meritocracy have been reported by newspapers and web media in China since 2010 (NetEase 2014) and therefore we selected. A further examination revealed that six cases are not in fact related to meritocracy. Therefore, the remaining 14 cases have been included for analysis. Cross-checking between multiple sources of reporting and analysis of the government documents was conducted to ensure the accuracy of the case information. The cases are summarized in Table 2. Applying the pattern-matching data analytical technique, this study links evidence from the cases to test the hypotheses and propositions summarized in Table 1.

First, as shown in Figure 1, the 14 cases display a pattern of fast and young promotion. Compared to national normal, average promotion interval and promotion age in the 14 cases are significantly shorter and younger. Specifically, in the cases, the average promotion interval from the rank of clerk to deputy section chief, then to section chief, deputy division chief, and division chief is 2.8, 2.4, 4.2, and 2 years, respectively. In contrast, the national average is 8, 3, 7, and 7 years (Sohu 2012). Furthermore, in the 14 cases, the average promotion age to deputy section chief till division chief is 23.1, 25.6, 29.1, and 30 years, respectively, whereas the expected age of promotion under personnel regulation is 30, 35, 40, and 45 years (Kou and Tsai 2014).

What can explain these pattern differences in average promotion interval and age? Is it because those in the 14 cases possess outstanding merit? An in-depth examination finds the contrary – their meritocratic qualifications are far below the average level nationwide. In terms of educational merit, for example, only two

Table 1. Typology of Chinese prismatic bureaucratic cultures

Categories	Organization	Scope	Impact	Risk
Favouritism	None	High	Low	Very low
Nepotism	Low	High	High	High
Localism	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Factionalism	High	Low	Low	Low

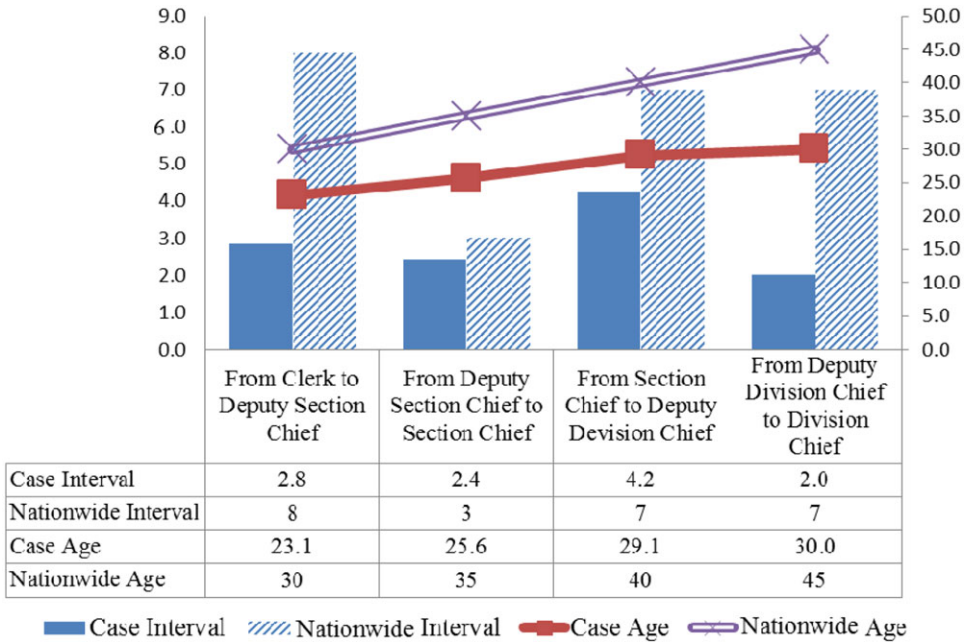
Table 2. Summary of 14 Cases

Case	Violations	Personal connections	Results
Wang Qian 王茜	No educational qualification, illegal recruitment and promotion	Father is the head of the supervisory agency.	Disqualification as civil servant, dismissal of post, father received warning and dismissed
Xu Tao 徐韬	Illegal promotion	Parents are local leaders.	Dismissal of post
Dong Haitai 董海涛	Doubtful qualification for promotion	Uncle is a provincial department head.	No disciplinary action
Liu Qiong 刘琼	Illegal promotion and appointment	Father is a deputy city party Secretary and then head of city congress.	Dismissal of post
Yuan Huizhong 袁慧中	Illegal promotion	Father is a city head of legal affairs.	No disciplinary action
Yi Xiang 易翔	Illegal promotion	Father is a city vice mayor.	Dismissal of post
Wang Qing 王卿	Illegal recruitment	Father is a city mayor.	No disciplinary action
Yan Ning 闫宁	Illegal promotion	Two relatives are provincial department-level leaders and two are county heads.	Resignation
Han Han 韩寒	Illegal promotion	Father is a head of county civil service management.	Han and her father both resigned
Zheng Xiaoyan 郑晓燕	Illegal recruitment and illegal promotion	Father is a county magistrate.	No disciplinary action
Jiang Zhongyong 江中咏	Illegal promotion	Father is a deputy county magistrate.	Dismissal of post
Chang Junsheng 常骏生	Falsification of qualifications in recruitment	Father is a head of county civil service management.	Disqualification as civil servant, dismissal of post, father received warning and dismissed
Zhang Qunzi 赵群子	Illegal promotion	Uncle is a county party chief.	No disciplinary action
Wang Ran 王然	Illegal promotion	Father-in-law-to-be is a head of county civil service management.	No disciplinary action

persons in the fourteen cases graduated from elite universities in China, another one from an ordinary university, five from local colleges, and five from high schools or technical secondary schools. What distinguishes these 14 cases from other civil servants is only that they

have personal connections with leaders who can influence the public HRM decisions. This seems to be the sole explanation for their fast and young promotion. Ten of fourteen cases involve a father in a powerful position in the government of the same or nearby jurisdiction or in

Figure 1. The Average Promotion Interval Years and Promotion Age



Sources: Sohu (2012) and Kou and Tasi (2014).

the parent supervisory agency. The case findings, therefore, demonstrate a strong familial and patrimonial pattern in Chinese public HRM as predicted by the conceptual framework. For those local leaders, the principle of meritocracy seems to have been disregarded. The interest of their children or relatives definitely outweighs that of the regime. Such a familism-oriented bureaucratic culture with low group boundary and weak rule binding is pervasive across China. Fewsmith (2014) noted a widespread tendency of clanization in Chinese local leadership appointments in recent years.

Second, all the four types of bureaucratic culture challenge the principle of meritocracy. In addition to favouritism and nepotism analyzed above, two cases from Xiangtan City, Hunan Province, are illustrative of localism and factionalism. One is Wang Qian (王茜), a high school graduate, who was promoted to a deputy chief of a district bureau of development and reform at age of 21 when her father was the head of the city commission of development and reform, a parent supervisory agency. The other

is Xu Tao (徐韬), who had nine transfers and promotions in 5 years even during his full-time graduate study period, and was eventually promoted to be a deputy county magistrate, while his parents were local leaders. Both Wang’s and Xu’s parents are natives of Xiangxiang County, part of the Xiangtan City. It is reported that leaders from Xiangxiang formed an informal association, the ‘Xiangxiang gang’, which is very active in local politics of Xiangtan City (Zeng and Huang 2013). Indeed, within the local Chinese state, localism and factionalism are highly integrated. Goodman (2000) observed a propensity toward parochialisation among local leaders, featured with a strong localism. Nevertheless, as kinship can be relatively easy to recognize whereas factionalism is difficult to monitor due to its closed nature, the violations against the principle of meritocracy are mostly in the form of nepotism.

Third, the violations against meritocracy in the 14 cases seem to be evoked by the disintegrated ends-means schema. Chinese culture emphasizes achievement goals very much, but

without a corresponding emphasis on appropriate means. In other words, norm violations for private interests are culturally and conventionally acceptable and hence universal in officialdom. Civil service positions have been highly desirable achievement goals attached with extraordinary cultural values in China. For instance, since 2010, more than 20% university graduates have registered for civil service exam, although the chance for these applicants to be admitted is only slightly above 1% (National Statistics Bureau 2012). The scarcity of positions for entry and promotion motivates disqualified individuals to reject the legitimate means, namely the principle of meritocracy, to attain the culturally dominant goals in civil service. Such norm violations have traditionally been a persistent and conventional practice, as a top county leader acknowledged it (Feng 2010: 159):

If my sister worked in Zhong County, which I don't have to point it out [to those personnel agencies], then her career and promotion would [automatically] receive special attentions. This is a political tradition for thousand years [in China].

In all 14 cases, on average, it takes 5.8 years to eventually expose those rule violations. During the 5.8 years, all the violations were tolerated and allowed tacitly as normal till they were reported by external watchdogs including newspapers, online media, and Internet users. In other words, meritocracy as the legitimate means has been deinstitutionalized in Chinese public HRM at local levels.

Fourth, there is no effective *ex ante* institution to check the bureaucratic culture and deter behaviours that are inconsistent with the principle of meritocracy. Without a concept of neutral competence, meritocracy could be seriously abused. Sun (2008) found that meritocracy rules are just taken as formalities at local governments. In the nomination and scrutinization stage, for instance, the party secretary and the party Organization Department may set criteria tailored for a target candidate, then look for the 'right fit', before going through the formal procedures to legitimize the selection. Feng (2010) developed a double-circle model to describe such personnel management operation.

The inner circle is the formal rules and the outer is *guanxi* network. The recruitment, selection, and promotion of civil servants always start with the outer circle. Once completed, it then enters the inner circle for legitimation.

All the 14 cases illustrate the ineffectiveness of institutions to uphold the principle of meritocracy. In the case of Liu Qiong (刘琼), for example, due to the intervention and influence of her father, a deputy city party chief and then head of city congress, personnel rules were repeatedly violated in a series of her appointments and promotions. After graduating from a technical secondary school in July 1997 at the age of 18, she was recruited into the civil service on a probational basis. Two months later, she returned to full-time college education till July 1999. But during this period, she managed to pass her probation and became a regular civil servant, which was illegal. In November 2002, Liu obtained a temporary assignment as deputy party chief of a township. She was subsequently promoted as the government head and later the party chief of that township. Again this violated regulations as promotion is not allowed during temporary assignment. In November 2009, Liu was attached as a deputy party chief of a county again on temporary assignment. This was a significant promotion for which she was ineligible. Another case of Yan Ning (闫宁) also demonstrates the same pattern.

Conclusion

The developmental path of China's civil service system in the reform era is characterized by a paradox (Burns 2007; Feng 2010). On the one hand, this has been the period when significant progress has been made toward institutionalization, formalization, and rationalization of the system. Meritocracy has been embraced as the basic doctrine for public HRM. On the other hand, however, this has also been the time witnessing the increasing role of a traditional bureaucratic culture of favouritism, nepotism, localism, and factionalism in public HRM, reshaping the operation of the Chinese civil service system in a way that in fact challenges the principle of meritocracy. The current

literature focuses on the institutional progress – and the related deficiencies – of the Chinese civil service system, but it has so far left the cultural aspects void. This research attempts to fill this gap by taking a cultural approach delineating cultural constraints on the implementation of the meritocracy principle. It presents a conceptual framework that connects the grid-group cultural theory, the culture and institutions thesis, the means-ends schema, and the amoral familism concept to suggest the importance of Chinese bureaucratic culture for understanding the cultural constraints over Chinese public HRM and how they have undermined the principle of meritocracy. The case findings provide initial support for the validity of this conceptual framework. This research also sheds some light on why the institutional design of Chinese civil service system has failed to sustain the principle of meritocracy. It suggests that the institutions are primarily derived from a hierarchical culture aimed to preserve the dominance of the party over the civil service and, as such, they have limited capacity to address the problems resulting from the individualism culture dictating Chinese bureaucrats.

Although Chan asserted that by 2020, ‘high on the public administration academic research agenda in China will be developing a theory and explanation for the relationship between politics and administration in the Chinese bureaucracy’ (2010: s302), this research highlights that adding a cultural dimension for this bureaucracy theory is equally imperative and significant. This paper sheds some initial light on such a proposed theory, a cultural theory of Chinese bureaucracy.

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