

# **THE BASIC MODELS, CHARACTERISTICS, AND DIRECTIONS OF CIVIL SERVICE REFORM IN CHINA: BASED ON ANALYSIS OF THE COMPETENCE OF THE CIVIL SERVICE**

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In recent years, in order to solve the high-tech needs of government departments and cut financial expenditures, the Chinese government has introduced civil service reforms and consequently created a position-rank two-track system. This paper is written from the perspective of increasing civil service competency. A review and explanation of some of China's most pertinent current models of civil service reform such as those of Jilin, Zhuhai, and Shenzhen will be presented. Those models will also be compared with other traditional civil service systems. Specific points that will be addressed are hiring, wages and termination. The article finally points out that the fundamental future direction of civil service reform is to further rationalize the relationship between the existing civil service system and the government employee system, and then establish and regulate the criteria and procedures regarding civil service recruitment, appraisal, promotion, and exit.

**Key Words:** Chinese public administration; civil service; position-rank two-track system; competency management

## **INTRODUCTION**

The civil service system is a necessary tool that is used as a means of completing the mission of the state and government. However it also serves as a major actor when it comes to the implementation of policy objectives and values. As a result of the critical roles it plays in the government, the civil service system occupies a very important position regarding the functionality of the modern state and government. This is even more interesting as far as China is concerned because China has achieved rapid economic growth while still heavily relying on the government's role in the economy. How does the Chinese

government arrive at a certain level of government efficiency based on the traditional government employment system?

Before China adopted market-oriented economic reforms, the education level of civil servants was very low. According to Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security statistics, during the period from 1978 to 1982, of the 36 million state cadres, young civil servants with an educational background that included secondary school, junior college, and university accounted for just 3.6% of the total population of Chinese civil servants. Moreover, no more than five in 100 cadres had earned more than a secondary school diploma, while other

cadres had only received basic intensive courses in literacy and special education for workers and peasants. In addition to poor education, the mechanism used for appointments, dismissals and promotion of civil servants was riddled with problems. From 1996 to 2003, of the nation's five million civil servants, 32,549 voluntarily resigned from their post. That's to say that, out of the entire population of Chinese civil servants, an average of less than 0.0065% chose to leave. In the seven years from 1996 to 2003, from a total of 1,937,400 unqualified civil servants, fewer than 2,500 were dismissed, resulting in a civil servant dismissal rate roughly equivalent to 0.001%. This implies that civil servants take no initiative to leave the government departments they work in, while the government lacks the ability to improve these employees' competence via threat of dismissal or other means.

Civil servants are not only the main administrative body of the government, but are also responsible for carrying out the government's functions in Chinese society. Consequently the development and implementation of many regulations and policies are dependent on civil service groups. Due to their important role in government affairs, the quality of the civil servants and their capacity to meet the demands of their jobs directly determines the efficiency and effectiveness of the government's performance. Therefore, in order for China to continue its phenomenal growth and increasing prominence on the international stage, a major overhaul of the nation's civil service system is badly needed in order to transform the administrative management system so that a "government of limited functions" and "effective government" can be built.

### **REFORM MODELS OF CIVIL SERVICE IN CHINA**

China is considered by many to be notorious for its inefficient and opportunistic bureaucrats and, perhaps more importantly, for its rampant nepotism. Because government employees were traditionally not selected based on their competence but on their ideological loyalty, the proficiency of public employees was not given close attention as long as China remained a closed system. However, as the Chinese economy continues to flourish and grow, the nation's archaic administrative structure and practices are beginning to reveal themselves, thus provoking the country's leaders to

criticize party members and public employees for corruption as well as poor performance.

In order to overcome the constraints of a dysfunctional bureaucratic system and consequently improve the structure, quality, and administrative efficiency of its civil service, China has begun to carry out widespread civil service reforms. However, despite good intentions and the existence of many possible models, it seems that little thought was given as to which model of civil service was most suitable to accommodate the Chinese political and cultural contexts, and the reformers – apparently blindly – began to introduce a Western style civil service (cf., Bekke, Perry and Toonen, 1996; Farazmand, 1997).<sup>1</sup>

The first step of the reform was to enact a series of laws and regulations that began on October 1, 1993, when the "Temporary Regulation of Civil Servants" directive was officially issued. This piece of regulation represented an initial push in what would be an ongoing struggle to rid the Chinese government of its widespread nepotistic and corrupt practices, which many believed were responsible for the inefficient and ineffective Chinese bureaucracy. The new battery of regulations aimed at establishing a legal framework from which major human resources practices such as the hiring, firing, training, and promotion of civil servants – activities that were previously highly discretionary – could be standardized and more closely regulated. What is important to note here is that the legislation which would be implemented over the next fifteen years apparently lacked a systematic approach, seeking to attack the problems of Chinese public administration in their entirety rather than incrementally. Despite being incredibly ambitious, however, the new laws and regulations provided a much needed legal basis for civil service reform.

This first step of the reform process was important because it sought to break down the archaic bureaucratic system on which China was relying to fill its administrative ranks. In other words, it represented a measured attempt to pick apart the communist spoils system and most likely replace it with a merit system, however it is not clear what kind of merit system the drafters of the regulations had in mind. The next step of reforms called for a more concrete implementation of recruitment and incentive systems that were aimed at accelerating the replacement of the old spoils system. To accomplish this, there are two main opposing models that can be followed: the position classification system and the rank

system (Nigro and Nigro, 1994; Stahl, 1983; Carter, 1998; Yu and Im, 2002). The former focuses on the position that an employee will occupy, while the latter emphasizes an employee's career. Both models contain notions of building a meritocracy, but each emphasizes a different aspect of personnel administration. Generally, because these models oppose each other they should not be pursued simultaneously, however it appears that China has created a system that allows for the coexistence of both.

Since the old system is characterized by lifelong employment in a given position, the new models with which China is experimenting concentrate on recruitment and employment over a fixed period of time. In areas such as Jilin, Zhuhai, and Shenzhen the administrative models, while differing in terms of their hierarchical division, compensation, and flexibility of employment (see Table 1), are notable first attempts at restructuring the administrative bureaucracies in order to create fairer and more effective administrations. It is in this context that another important initiative of the Chinese civil

service reform can be identified and best classified as a "government employee system," a term which when translated literally into Chinese means "a personnel administration system that acts in the interest of society." This is to say that the taxpayer has commissioned government agencies to employ personnel during a given period to work on a particular project. "Civil Service Law" stipulates that "authorities in accordance with operational requirements, after being approved by the authorities above the provincial level, can implement an employee system that incorporates highly specialized positions and supporting positions." Thus, since 2003, Jilin, Zhuhai, and Shenzhen have taken the lead in implementing various forms of the government employee system.

It can be seen from Table 1 that while the substance of the government employee system reforms in Jilin, Zhuhai, and Shenzhen differs, the reforms share a common characteristic in that each considers the hiring of new employees as a starting point from which the civil service can absorb high quality, able, talented

**Table 1.** The three models of China's government employment system

Content	Jilin Model	Zhuhai Model	Shenzhen Model
Position orientation and hierarchic division	Government employees are divided into three kinds: ordinary employees, senior employees and high-level senior employees. They have neither administrative duties nor administrative powers, and do not occupy administrative positions.	Government employees are divided into two kinds: regular employees and senior employees. The latter accounts for the administrative personnel, The former do not have administrative duties and generally do not have executive power.	Government employees account for the administrative personnel but do not include into the series. Senior employees have administrative duties and executive power.
Negotiatory wage system	Commission system. Commission and social insurance are included in the government budget.	Annual salary system. Annual salary and social insurance are included in the budget. Government employees have the same vacation, work injury, pension, and other welfare benefits (excluding social security) as civil servants.	Implementing the government employee system in all auxiliary management and public service posts. Using different and new wage system.
Flexible hiring period	During the course of employment, in principle, government employees cannot take other part-time jobs. When terminating employment relations, the government is not responsible for arrangement of work.	Contracts for a period of 1?5 years. During the period of employment, in principle, government employees cannot take other part-time jobs. When terminating employment relations, the government is not responsible for arrangement of work.	The period of employment is determined by the employing unit, but the maximum term of each single period of employment is 3 years. Contract may be renewed up to two times; each time the renewal period is for no more than 3 years.

people from the local labor pool in order to meet the public sector's need for a higher level, professional, and more technically competent work force. At the same time, the reforms enable the government's fiscal expenditure to be reduced, the civil service structure to be improved, and the vigor and vitality of the civil service system to be enhanced. Therefore, these reforms can be deemed a bold step towards the overhaul of the national civil service recruitment system.

### MAIN FEATURES OF THE NEW CHINESE CIVIL SERVICE

The main characteristic of the position and rank two-track system is the classification of civil servant management under the unified leadership of the Communist Party of China. In contrast to a number of Western countries, China's Civil Service Law stresses the need to uphold the unified leadership of the Communist Party of China as well as to maintain the integrity of government workers and the unity of personnel and cadres. Therefore, China's civil service does not adopt the "position classifications of civil servants" as many Western countries do. Instead, the scope of the civil service includes not only the executive staff, but also the staff in organs of the Chinese Communist Party, the National People's Congress, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the prosecution, and the democratic parties. Within these organs, civil servants are divided into three categories: the integrated management class, the professional and technical class, and the administrative law enforcement class. Within each class, officials can hold either a leadership position or a non-leadership position. Leadership positions are divided into ten grades and non-

leadership positions are divided into eight grades; it can be said that everyone in Chinese government, from the president to the premier, all the way down to the ordinary local administrative clerk, is included in the field of civil service.

### The Selection Methods: The Combination of Appointment and Engagement

Civil servants are appointed to their posts by higher authorities after completing a rigorous training and assessment procedure. Those who are able to enter the civil service are essentially assured a stable future, thanks to a job that they can expect to hold for the rest of their life. As a result of the extremely difficult selection process, those who are chosen to become civil servants are considered to have successfully become part of a powerful circle of elite.

Upon entering the civil service field, a new employee signs a written contract that is based on equality in order to determine both parties' rights and obligations; the employment contract can be changed or retracted by mutual agreement. In 2009, the central state organs announced that 7,555 civil service positions were engaged, and 13,566 people were reached in recruitment efforts (Table 2).

In 2009, Shenzhen recruited twenty civil servants from the local population using a combination of written exams and interviews. This structure was chosen in order to assess applicants' abilities to meet the professional requirements and demands of the particular position they were applying for, and to determine the number of interviews to conduct. Interviewers utilized unstructured interview methods, which involved simulations, case studies, practical exercises, and leaderless group discussions. The aim of this process was to improve the

**Table 2.** Number of Civil Service Members Recruited for the Central State Organs in 2009

Category	Number of posts	Number recruited
Institutions of State Department system managed according to Civil Service Law	1658	2456
Other units	756	1612
Central party organs	259	379
Central state administrative organs	442	694
Central state administrative subordinate agencies and detached offices	4440	8425
Total	7555	13566

Data source: Human resources and social safety net

competition among interviewees, examine whether applicants had the knowledge and ability to select jobs that they were qualified for, and to improve the scientific methods and fairness of the interview process.<sup>2</sup>

### Determination of Professional Quality

Regarding the civil service appointment system, the government strictly controls the hiring and recruitment of personnel. At present, little has changed as far as the total number of employees of the State Council's administration, or any other departments for that matter (Kai Ma, 2008). In addition to this stagnation, the current hiring processes make clear the requirements for the quality of civil service members. The case of Guangdong gives a clear illustration of the wide range of demands civil servants are expected to satisfy, ranging from administrative capacities and public service ability, to learning ability to communication and coordination abilities.<sup>3</sup>

Taking into account the current financial crisis, negative effects can be seen regarding the employment of graduates in 2009. The Central State Organ's civil service examinations have significantly relaxed the minimum required number of years of low level work experience. This requirement of manual labor stressed by Mao during the revolution period still remains, but civil service reform has sought to ameliorate the conditions. Of 7,555 jobs, the number of filled posts not requiring any manual labor experience is 6,257, accounting for 82.8% of the total number of positions filled; and 11,775 people were recruited for such posts, accounting for 86.8% of the total enrollment (Table 3).<sup>4</sup> Relaxation of this requirement grants a considerable

amount of extra room for those participating in the civil service entrance examinations in 2009.

### Salary Incentive System: The Separation of Contractual Wage and Actual Wage

The salary of civil servants is defined as the financial compensation for services rendered by an employee. Wage levels for the civil service do not directly correspond to those of private enterprise, but do implicitly take this factor into consideration. Article 75 of the Civil Service Law stipulates that the government must determine the level of staff salaries by taking into account the salary of staffs in private enterprise and use this information as a basis when determining adjustments to civil service wages. Secondly, the Civil Service Law creates four new divisions for civil servant compensation: basic salary, allowances, subsidies, and bonuses.

Government employees accept and adhere to the agreed upon wage system, which amounts to an annual salary system and a commission system. The precise salary is based upon the nature of the specific position and fluctuates according to factors such as human resources and professional risks. In Jilin province, the tenet of "first-class talents, first-class rewards" has resulted in a salary system that consists of 14 salary grades, with 1,100 Yuan serving as the average monthly salary. Civil servants on the second rung of the pay scale would earn 2,200 Yuan per month, while those who occupy a coveted spot at the top of this pay scale are able to earn 15 times the average monthly pay, resulting in a monthly salary of 16,500 Yuan, or an annual salary of nearly 200,000 Yuan.<sup>5</sup> These important, uncommon, and ambitious attempts to attract talented people into the

**Table 3.** Minimum Number of Years of Low Level Work Required for Civil Service Recruitments by Central State Organs in 2009

Minimum number of years of low level work	Number of posts	Number recruited
Two	952	1251
Three	136	192
Four	13	22
No limitation	6257	11775
Five years or more	156	236
One	41	90
Total	7555	13566

public sector are unique and something which even a developed country like Korea cannot attempt.

### **“Virtue, Ability, Diligence, and Achievements” – Four Aspects of the Performance Appraisal System**

The government assesses civil servants according to the responsibilities accompanying their jobs as well as their ability to perform the tasks required by their position. Assessed factors are divided among four categories: virtue, ability, diligence, and achievements. “Virtue” refers to political ideology, policy level, legal adherence, teamwork skills, professional ethics, and social morality; “ability” refers to the knowledge necessary to satisfactorily perform the job, and working ability; “diligence” refers to attitude, dedication, and attendance; “achievement” refers to the quantity, quality, efficiency, and innovation of the work, as well as contribution and impact. Civil Service Law provides that, if the annual assessment is simply based upon notions of pass or failure, staff members who are not performing well but have not yet reached conditions that merit dismissal, are required to attend job training. Upon completing the mandatory training, these employees, in principle, can return to work at their original post while staff who fail to meet this requirement should be demoted or dismissed.

This emphasis on both the Communist Party’s values and the concepts outlined by modern performance is reflected all the way down to the training programs of the civil service. On the one hand, the training system concentrates on professional ethics and codes of conduct for education, while on the other, the system provides professional training and education.

For example, Shenzhen and Jilin, which constitute two comprehensive pilot cities for the civil service training system, have continually developed their training systems. Since 2001, Shenzhen City has rolled out many new training programs in fields such as practical English for the civil service, administration, e-government, information technology, and Civil Service Law.

Similarly, Jilin province has carried out training programs for its civil servants as well. Civil servants are able to choose training times and topics based on their working hours, job requirements, and personal needs. At present, this type of short-term special training in Jilin province has been held three times and focused on ten topics. Thus far 1,100 people have attended these training

sessions and benefited from a unique opportunity to learn and replenish relevant theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, these types of programs have played an irreplaceable role in developing a highly qualified civil service and improving administrative efficiency.

### **The Tenure System of Civil Service in Leadership Positions and the Dismissal System for Government Employees**

Since the 1980s, China has enacted, amended, and improved regulations on the tenure system of civil servants holding leadership positions. “Regulations governing the selection and appointment of leading party and government cadres” provide that local party and leading members serving the same district office must cycle through positions for periods of ten years. Article four of “State Civil Service Posts require interim rotational measures” also states that if a member of the civil service leadership holds the same office for more than five years, in principle he or she should rotate into a new position. General elections of the People’s Congress and county and city governments have become statutory, normal, and customary events in China’s political life.

The government employee system is completely managed in accordance with signed contracts, which may or may not be extended upon expiration. Exit mechanisms for government employees go beyond the long-term employment system of civil service.

Thus, the aim of the position-rank two-track system is to transform the functioning of the government, including orientation of the government’s role, degree of division of labor, institutional settings, and the responsibility to define. Chinese civil service reform therefore offers three positive lessons.

First, the position-rank two-track system breaks the permanence and stability of the civil service system. It enhances flexibility of the employment relationship between the government and its employees, achieves transparency, and offers more mobility and participation in civil service personnel management.

Second, the position-rank two-track system has changed the “rules of control” of civil service management, and consequently has achieved a “result oriented” style of evaluation so that government employees pay more attention to achieving the goals of their department and improving their own performance. Additionally, the new system has changed the “generalist nature” of the civil service in order to achieve an elite technocratic form of

management, which has enabled government to better respond to increasingly complex public affairs.<sup>6</sup>

Last, this position-rank two-track system put pressure on civil servants to focus on improving their productivity. “Old school” civil servants spent much of their time pursuing their own interests rather than those of the state. Consequently this structure has helped to improve the overall quality of the civil service and to change administrative practices.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Certainly, the defects of the position-rank two-track system are nearly as evident as its benefits. Prominent problems are as follows:

- *First, the government’s rational ignorance and information asymmetry when dealing with employees always cause efficiency losses.* Government employees will take full advantage of the expertise they acquire and their special political status for personal gain; they are able to do this because supervision and information costs are extremely high for government.
- *Second, opportunistic government employees help contribute to efficiency losses.* Government employees will focus on the projects that can bring short-term benefits, even if they will bring detriment to society in the long run.
- *Third, the government employee system will lead administrative officers to use their power for purposes of “rent-seeking” and “rent-setting.”* Driven by self-interest, government employees may take the initiative to set rent or conspire with civil servants to obtain win-win benefits, even if it will be detrimental to society.
- *Fourth, the opportunity costs of the government employee system are difficult to predict and the transaction costs are high.* Studies have shown that in self-evaluations of civil service competency,

the number who considered themselves “not very competent” or as having “no competence” equaled zero, and those who considered themselves “morecompetent” accounted for 67.4% (Table 4) (Zhao, 2005). Therefore, the government must identify employees’ qualifications and abilities during recruitment, but it needs to pay a premium in order to do this.

- *Fifth, because of the particular nature of government work, the achievements of government employees are not measurable and therefore unpredictable to some extent* (Ball, Nichols and Gortner, 2007). A high salary is likely to depress ambition within the civil service (Chen, 2005).

Therefore, the position-rank two-track system is conducive to various kinds of talent selection. But because the two-track system undermines the integrity of the personnel management system, it results in a division of the civil service examinations’ power and other powers. Coupled with a deficit of governmental ethics and the existence of resentment in society, the government employee system cannot simply rely on the government’s moral standards, social supervision, and other “soft constraints,” but also needs to integrate basic spirit and principles into the entire civil service system.

Based on this, there are several possible ways to reform the existing civil service position-rank two-track system .

**Direction 1: Continue to play up the dominant position and function of the civil service system.** This is the current situation of the civil service. Although some highly specialized tasks or projects are difficult for civil servants to complete, that does not mean government employees can replace civil servants. The government can solve the problem of low quality civil service via government procurement.

**Direction 2: Reform the civil service classification system; establish a mechanism for government**

**Table 4.** Current Self-Evaluation Form of Competence for Cadres

Level of competence	highly competent	better than competent	generally competent	not very competent	no competence
Number	9	64	22	0	0
Percentage	9.4	67.4	23.2	0	0

### employees to transfer into the civil service system.

Government employees can enter the civil service system according to the management of technology civil service. Moreover, at the same time, the government can determine the numbers and types of employees with the actual ability to control the government's human resources costs. This will not only reduce the operating costs of two mechanisms, but also can develop the institutional resources in the current civil service system. This is also a good path to follow for the civil service classification systems in Western countries.

**Direction 3: Give a certain degree of executive authority to government employees to spark their enthusiasm.** Regulations that strip government employees of administrative power are based on two considerations. The first is to maintain the purity of the civil service and to ensure the legitimacy of the government's public administration. The second is the concern over the possibility that employees will not pay enough attention to their administrative tasks and instead pursue executive positions, which will consequently ruin the established order and spread in a disguised form. It is not in line with the practical requirements of the government's public management strategy, and only results in government employees limiting their technical and innovative effectiveness. Therefore, the important methods to achieve effectiveness and authority of technical implementation are 1) establish a suitable standard for promotion of government employees, 2) gradually dilute the high salary system for government employees, and 3) protect government employees with appropriate executive power in non-management positions.

In short, from the perspective of relationships between the civil service system and the government employee system, the orientation of the government employee system in the end is "complementary" to the civil service system, meaning that a new set of management mechanisms can operate hand-in-hand with the civil service system. Alternatively, the government employee system could be incorporated in the existing civil service system. These are the most important and critical factors affecting China's reform of its civil service recruiting system. In the future, reform should be concentrated on a more comprehensive upgrade of the competencies of civil servants and should rationalize the relationship between the existing civil service system and the government employee system. Despite the tremendous reform efforts there could

be a continuity of the old systems as the cases of other institutions show (c.f. DiMaggio, P. J. and Powel. 1991).

"Nothing is more difficult than the implementation of a new system, nothing is more doubtful than success of a new system, and there is nothing more dangerous than management of a new system." In this sense, the improvement of the civil service system is a heavy and long journey.

## NOTES

1. Taking a good model is important. For example, the Korean government attempted Western style civil service reforms since the 1960, opining that it made Korea appear like a department store of administrative reforms owing to its diverse and sometimes contradictory approaches. However, NPM reforms in the Korean public sector are a wrong prescription to the problem because if a bureaucracy like the one in Korea, strongly rooted on Jupiter soil, manages to introduce numerous Hercules style reforms in a short span, it may mistakenly be perceived a progressive reformer as reform champions, especially in government, its consultants, and development financial institutions, never tire of claiming that Korean reform is one of the most successful examples of reform among OECD countries (Im, 2003). Therefore, long-term success of NPM reforms in the Korean public sector is doubtful.
2. See [http://www.rsj.sz.gov.cn/ztlm/rsbzx/200907/t20090708\\_1151386.htm](http://www.rsj.sz.gov.cn/ztlm/rsbzx/200907/t20090708_1151386.htm)
3. Guangdong Provincial Personnel Department. (Jan 19, 2004). Common Standards of Competence Framework of the National Civil Service for (Trial) in Guangdong Province. [2004]27
4. For details, see Statistical analysis of the position classification for national civil service [DB/OL] <http://020.teambuy.com.cn/house/showcpnews.php?newsid=33728,2009-08-29>
5. Relative to the attraction talented people of economically developed areas, Jilin province "high salary" standard is only relative to the general government civil servants'.
6. Yingchun, Zheng. Government Employee System Forced the Chinese Civil Service Reform. *Academic Seminar*.

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