

Impressions of Public Administrative Education in Northwestern China

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Visits to China by U.S. faculty members in the field of public administration tend to be concentrated in eastern China, especially in Beijing and Shanghai, and to a lesser extent Guangzhou. Perhaps most of the exchanges involving U.S. public administrative faculty occur in connection with Renmin University of China, located in Beijing. As is well known, there are marked regional differences between the urban and rural sectors as well as between the eastern and western areas in contemporary China. In June 2007, I had the opportunity to visit and lecture at the School of Management at Lanzhou University in Lanzhou, Gansu. Previously, I had lectured and/or taught at Renmin University of China, Northwest University in Xi'an (Xi Bei Da Xue), and Fudan University in Shanghai. My visit to Lanzhou University included two lectures and several formal, but unstructured, meetings with graduate and undergraduate students. This article summarizes my impressions of public administrative education at Lanzhou University, which to a large extent services northwestern China in the field of management.

Lanzhou University

Located on the Yellow River, Lanzhou is the capital of Gansu Province. Gansu is ethnically diverse with 54 nationalities comprising about ten percent of its 26 million people. The largest ethnic groups are Hui, Tibetan, Dongxian, Tu, Yugu, Baoan, Mongolian, Sala, Hazak, and Manchu.¹ Lanzhou University was founded in 1909. Today, it houses 23 schools and enrolls more than 36,000 students, including 12,000 undergraduates.² The university is oriented toward the "special characteristics and problems of China's Northwestern Provinces."³ Its School of Management, in which public administration is taught, was established in 2004. The school confers masters degrees in public administration (MPAs) and business administration, as well as doctoral degrees in administrative management. The university was the second in China to offer public administration degrees, with the first group of students graduating in 1987. Currently there are approximately 920 undergraduate majors in public administration—a number the school seeks to reduce to about 600 in the near future. About 50 percent of the students are affiliated with state owned enterprises. Since 1987 it has graduated more than 200 MPA students. At present, there are about a dozen doctoral students. The School of Management has

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¹ Gansu Provincial People's Government, www.gansu.gov.cn/en/BasicDetail.asp?CID=52 (visited December 22, 2007).

² "Welcome to Lanzhou University," www.lzu.edu.cn/notice/English/Introduction.htm (visited December 22, 2007).

³ Ibid.

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approximately 60 faculty, including 27 guest professors.⁴ The university's main campus is located in a downtown area of Lanzhou. It also has a newer, very modern campus in a less populated area, about a 40 minute drive away. The newer campus, in particular, reflects some of the ethnic diversity of the geographic area. The public administration programs incorporate material of particular relevance to the university's location including ethnicity, social welfare, and rural development. These programs also emphasize comprehensive applied education and globalization. The MPA curriculum includes concentrations in human resources management, strategy, public affairs, public policy, local government, and government information.⁵

Public Administration in Western China

Public administration virtually everywhere consists of a mix of management, politics and policy, and law. Chinese public administration is characterized by political control by the Communist Party and "unitary command."⁶ Party control is maintained through a "dual bureaucracy" in which party cadre organization parallels the state bureaucracy.⁷ As Chan and Chow note, "It is hardly atypical for lower echelons to receive direct instructions from Party offices that supersede administrative decrees or even legal stipulations. It is in this context that the secretariats of Party committees are entrusted with the responsibility and authority to develop and approve management policies and to design, as well as monitor, daily operational procedures and processes."⁸ Unitary control is from the Standing Committee of the Politburo downward. Under current civil service law, "the Party has full management control of state civil servants—hence, there is no distinction between state civil servants and cadres."⁹ However, in a nation as large and geographically diverse as China, top down control of public administration is inevitably incomplete if not impossible. There is a "development divide" in which "cadres in the developed areas tend to focus on what the central authority has not specifically prohibited, whereas their counterparts elsewhere still focus on what is permitted."¹⁰ Within this framework, public administration in western China is hampered by centralized decision making that may be inappropriate for local conditions, the inability of administrative procedures, rules, and regulations to keep up with change, and subjective performance evaluation.¹¹

Unless appropriately balanced, politicization will be in tension with modern managerial techniques. In this context, the weight Chinese administration places on "political investigation" of cadres can be problematic.¹² Political investigation focuses on personal characteristics,

⁴ Lanzhou University, School Management [brochure] (Lanzhou, PRC: Lanzhou University, no date) and interview with Bao Guoxian, Dean of the School of Management, June 21, 2007.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hon S. Chan and King W. Chow, "Public Management Policy and Practice in Western China," *American Review of Public Administration* 37 (No. 4, December 2007): 479-498, 484.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 485.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 489.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 490.

¹² Hon S. Chan, "Performance Accountability in a Marxist-Lennist State: The Case of a Local Government in the People's Republic of China." Unpublished manuscript, Department of Public and Social Administration, City University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 10.

solidarity building, and life style, as well as work accomplishment.¹³ The "construction of spiritual civilization," that is, commitment to party leadership and ideology can be especially important in individual performance evaluations.¹⁴ It is within this context that public administrative education at Lanzhou University seeks to teach contemporary managerial thought and technical skills to students who are interested in public administration.

Discussions with Students

Public administration in China is a high prestige occupation. Competition for entrance into university public administration programs and government jobs is very stiff. In my experience, students relish the opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussions of public administrative theory, practice, and reform. To some extent, they view the U.S. as a paragon of cost-effective administration even as Americans consider it quite otherwise. There is always a murmur of amazement when groups of Chinese public administration students are told that civil servants are held in low esteem by many, probably most Americans. My lectures on "Administrative Reform in the USA" and "Human Resources Management: Seven 'Big Questions,'" were well attended and provoked several incisive questions, many of which were voiced in English. However, more was learned on my part at two unstructured sessions with students, one at the graduate level and the other with undergraduates. These lasted about two hours each. After brief introductions, they were driven completely by the students' questions.¹⁵ As the sessions unfolded, the students became more relaxed and the questions asked and topics covered ranged more widely.

At the graduate session, discussion focused on social welfare issues, with particular interest expressed in the plight of poor people in the U.S. The students asked about the U.S. welfare system, education and educational inequality, housing programs, nutritional support, and medical care. It was evident to me that the students were puzzled by inequality and the minimalist safety net of a nation they consider to be so wealthy. I cannot assess extent to which such questions and interests reflect a general perception of the U.S. as lacking compassion and equity. However, I received similar questions at Northwest University in 2005, during which it became clear that the Chinese media and U.S. sources of information created radically different images of poverty in America.

Turning to more technical matters, the questions focused on such classic public administrative themes as centralization and decentralization and the accompanying intergovernmental relationships. China, which has a history of both centralization and decentralization, is currently in a decentralizing phase within a framework of performance management goals being established centrally though implemented locally. Goals include achieving family planning, production objectives, and forestalling or dealing with mass

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵ Professor Hon S. Chan of the Department of Public and Social Administration at City University of Hong Kong participated in both discussions. My daughter, Sarah Rosenbloom, a licensed social worker, participated in the undergraduate session.

complaints. As with many other aspects of Chinese administration, the mix of centralizing and decentralizing elements are highly complex.¹⁶

The students also brought up corruption, which is problematic if not endemic in Chinese local and regional administration. Agreement seemed to be reached that increasing public administrators' salaries and instituting more thoroughgoing merit systems could help reduce corruption. Additionally, the students focused on the moral qualities of administrators. This comported with research on subnational performance management initiatives in China. Points are not confined to the cost-effective accomplishment of the work at hand, but are also given for anti-corruption efforts.¹⁷ Concern with a phenomenon similar to the U.S. "revolving door" was also expressed in the context of corruption. In the U.S. case, the revolving door involves the movement of political appointees back and forth between public administrative posts and corporations—sometimes the very ones they were in a position to benefit while in government. The students saw a similar conflict of interest issue in the employment patterns associated with state owned enterprises. There seemed to be agreement that civil service reform should be aimed at both reducing corruption and enhancing efficiency by emphasizing honesty, service orientation, competence, and performance. However, one aspect of corruption in China is reliance on *guanxi* (relationships) which may be necessary to obtain social and economic benefits ranging from enrolling a child in elementary school to getting business permits, job placements, and pensions. *Guanxi* may be required even for benefits to which one is legally entitled. Because China's bureaucracy still touches all facets of daily life and competition for benefits and advantages among its vast population is keen, *guanxi* is often the only way to cut through official administrative proceduralism. Consequently, reducing corruption will require substantial reforms—including administrative law mechanisms-- and even a change in the nation's socio-political and administrative cultures.

The session with the undergraduates at the new campus was more free-flowing. Questions ranged from the relative merits of Presidents Clinton and Bush to the prospects of Hillary Clinton being elected president, U.S. and Chinese relations, the media, the Chinese stock market, the negative effects of rapid economic development, and the upcoming 2008 Olympic Games. I was surprised by the sense that there was incompatibility between democracy and freedom, the concern being majority tyranny and inequality. Overall, the students seemed more interested in free trade issues—and what they perceive as U.S. hypocrisy regarding the enforcement of anti-dumping policy—than with human rights. Whereas a typical American student in public administration could be expected to be more interested in the relationship between torture policy and the U.S. national and international image, these Chinese students thought U.S. inconsistency on free trade put the U.S. in a very bad light. For them, as perhaps with the graduates, China's major shortcoming seemed to be corruption, not the issues of human rights and governmental control of information that are featured prominently in the U.S. media.

¹⁶ Chan, "Performance Accountability in A Marxist-Lennist State," p. 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Future Directions: More Questions than Answers

Temptation to speculate about the future of Chinese public administration is almost irresistible. State administrators from the national to the local levels are subject to Communist Party direction. Yet, there is keen interest in western—and particularly, American—public administration and individual rights. I am told that my basic text, *Public Administration: Understanding Management, Politics, and Law in the Public Sector*,¹⁸ translated by Renmin University of China Press (2003), is the most used volume of its kind in MPA education in China. This is puzzling because the book is thoroughly based on the U.S. constitutional separation of powers. Even more intriguing—given the image of China portrayed by the U.S. media—is the recent translation of *Constitutional Competence for Public Managers*,¹⁹ which is aimed at teaching U.S. MPA students how to protect constitutional rights such as procedural due process while pursuing standard public administrative values like efficiency and economy. Does the use of such works in Chinese MPA education point to convergence with western patterns of public administration? Are Chinese MPA programs looking for models or techniques that can be selectively adapted to China? Are these programs seeking to train a new generation of public administrators for participation in a global world? Does the younger generation that grew up in relative affluence admire features of U.S. administration such as its procedural justice coupled with sufficient flexibility to deal equitably with special cases, the availability of legal remedies to redress grievances, and strong merit orientation? Is there simply interest in how things are done elsewhere? Perhaps such books are used by default because native authors and experts are looking for solutions to China's administrative problems from abroad. Time may tell. However, one conclusion seems certain. China's MPA students will be anything but parochial—even if they never travel widely abroad. This is an important lesson Americans can learn from public administrative education in China.

¹⁸ New York: McGraw Hill, 1986, 1989, 1993, 1998, 2002, 2005; fifth and sixth editions coauthored with Robert S. Kravchuk.

¹⁹ Mason, Ohio: Thomson Custom Publishers/Thomson Learning, 2005. Translation published by Renmin University Press of China in 2003. Coauthored with James D. Carroll and Jonathan Carroll.