

Literature Review on Changes of Professional Title Policy in Chinese Universities

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Abstract

This paper reviews the literature of research on policy changes of the professional titles in Chinese universities and summarizes the characteristics of policy changes of college professional titles in four aspects of connotation, function, mechanism and model: changing from identity assessment to contractual appointment, from academic performance identification and resource allocation to performance management and incentive restraints, from the administrative-oriented to academic-oriented and from a mandatory institutional transition to an induced institutional transition. On this basis, the paper proposes focus of future research.

Key words: Chinese universities; Professional title policy; Changes; Literature review

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INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of new China, the professional title policy in Chinese universities has been evolving. Universities have conducted reforms regarding the standards for specialized title promotion and appointment system and introduced mobile and dynamic assessment, competition and elimination mechanisms, which to some extent has inspired teachers' academic motivation. Teachers spare no effort to get research projects and publish papers so as to gain a higher level of professional

title and the corresponding compensation. This article reviews research on professional title policy changes in Chinese universities to lay a solid foundation for the follow-up researches on the impact of professional title policy for the academic development of university teachers.

1. DEFINITIONS

The professional title system in modern Chinese universities came from the western educational system. The word "professional title" originally meant the "name of title", referring to a person's title. After the founding of our country, there was no clear professional title promotion system and the traditional licensed title system of the Republic of China was followed, namely professors, associate professors, lecturers, teaching assistants. The name, rank and number determined then were just to unify the chaotic salary grades of the country, and no relevant policies and regulations were made then. In 1956, the country formulated the "Regulations of the Academic Titles in University teachers" which divides university teachers into four levels: professors, associate professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants.

In March of 1960, the State Council issued the "Interim Provisions on College Teachers' Professional Titles and the Way to Determine and Promote"; in March of 1978, the State Council approved the "Report of the Education Ministry Regarding Issues on Universities to restore and Enhance Teachers' Professional Titles". The two documents defined the connotation of professional titles and that is the "professional title" in the concept of the majority of teachers and educators. It was also linked with salaries and compensations. However, it ignored the balance between the enjoyment of the corresponding job compensations and the fulfillment of the respective responsibility requirements and it ignored the principle of the unity of responsibilities and rights. In recent years, the

corresponding administrative governmental department has changed the connotation of “professional title” and defined it as the grade name to differentiate professional skills, education, abilities and achievements, taking it as a symbol to reflect a professional and technical personnel’s academic level, working abilities and past achievements and as an evaluation and recognition of the professional and technical personnel. At present, the content of university professional title policy includes basic conditions, business conditions (teaching, research, papers, monographs, awards, patents, achievement transformation, etc.), the appointment method, and exceptional condition.

2. RESEARCH ON THE CHANGES OF PROFESSIONAL TITLE POLICY IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

“A lot of intellectuals put issues related to professional titles as the most important problems to be resolved. That is because professional titles not only indicate the social recognition of their work achievements and academic levels, but also deal with series of issues related to compensations” (Gong, 1991, p.106). Although decades have passed, today this is still a consensus of university intellectuals. However, the certified title policy has gradually evolved in its connotation, function, operation mechanism and transition model. Regarding the points of view and research on changes in professional title policy universities, the following main points have been formed.

2.1 The Change of Connotation: From Identity Assessment to Contractual Appointment

From the early days of the founding of new China to 1986, university teachers’ professional titles were essentially based on an identity assessment. First, the title of college teachers was essentially a qualification accreditation in accordance with academic standards and conditions, and there was no strict position limit. The level of college teachers’ position became a symbol of teachers’ personal academic level and ability. Second, there was no limit on college teachers’ position term. Once appointed or assessed, the teacher would have the title for the whole life. Unless the teacher made serious political mistakes or violated the law, under normal circumstances the teacher’s title was a lifelong position and it was linked to compensations. Since then, the identity assessment of university teachers’ professional title accreditation has continued to be strengthened. In the late 1980s, the appointment system of university teachers was established. Particularly in the late 1990s, universities canceled professional title accreditation and implemented full appointment practice (Xin, 1991), which means university teachers’ professional titles were gradually transferred from the stereotype of identity assessment

to the contractual appointment. Although contractual appointment was still the reform attempt of some universities, there were not sufficient social conditions to implement contractual appointment in all colleges and universities (Ye, 2009).

At present, the vast majority of colleges and universities which implement real contractual appointment system are key universities or colleges and universities in developed regions, and very few local colleges and universities implement the new system and these universities are mostly still in the previous stage - although universities and college implement contractual appointment system regarding teachers’ position, yet in the actual implementation and in the mindset of the people, the position and the title are still combined. Universities still carry out certified title accreditation every year. In fact, real contractual appointment system is not truly established and the contractual appointment system just stays in form. Du (2007) summarizes its following five characteristics: a) There is no position setting carried out. Universities assess teachers’ position based on a promotion indicator every year and control the appointment of teachers’ position according to the indicator. b) The accreditation of teachers’ professional titles and the appointment are combined together. If the qualified title is accredited, the position is kept. It is quite common that universities emphasize professional title accreditation rather than appointment. The competition mechanism after the appointment is weakened, which in fact forms lifelong position system. This situation causes teachers to lack of competition and the decline of academic level and creativity. c) The promotion and demotion mechanism is not established, resulting in the repression of the advanced and the protection of the lagged. d) The assessment is distorted. The assessment is built on position evaluation, salary adjustment, bonus distribution and other transactional work, rather than focusing on the actual situation of teachers’ teaching and research work and the overall improvement of teachers’ quality. e) The qualification assessment is far away from the fair and merit appointment. The influence of government intervention, social connections and other non-academic factors clearly exists.

Zhao Zhikun’s point of view echoes that of Du Hailin. He points out that university position appointment has never been out of the vicious circle of accreditation. On the one hand, university teachers are keen on professional titles and they require title accreditation, social recognition and compensation implementation. On the other hand, people believe that there is a downward trend in the quality of evaluation and appointment and the credit of professional titles declines. In addition, universities on the one hand have to carry out reforms to separate accreditation and appointment powers, and on the other hand they have to connect accreditation and appointment together, resulting in the confusion of professional title

system, personnel system and distribution system. This undoubtedly strengthens accreditation and weakens appointment, resulting in a dilemma for the appointment system.

Although accreditation dominates the professional title policy, there are also many problems in the professional title accreditation process. Shan Bingbo in his research (2008) points out that, in order to overcome the inaccuracies caused by emphasizing on impression and lightening real achievements and avoid the influence of artificial factors on the assessment, combining the qualitative analysis and quantification computing together to establish a set of performance evaluation index system is a desirable approach, but such an assessment approach has soon gone to the extreme and become a critical and even unique indicator for academic evaluation. Shan (2008) points out that, "This is a refraction of the lack of academic authority and academic standards of Chinese academic institutions in the new era, and also a refraction of lack of academic confidence." He further migrates from the professional title assessment policy to issues of talent deficiency in Chinese universities. He believes talent deficiency in Chinese universities not only manifests in the non-equilibrium of scholars' age distribution, but also in the academic atmosphere. Recognized academic standards deep in the hearts of scholars have been interrupted. That is, due to the loss of discernment of academic achievements, one can only rely on a number of specific provisions such as the level of journals where articles are published, the number of papers, the size of projects, and the level of awards to carry out academic accreditation.

2.2 The Change of Function: From Academic Performance Identification and Resource Allocation to Performance Management and Incentive Restraints

Intellectuals' greatest wish is that their talents and work are recognized and respected by the society. The identification of teachers' professional qualification is to fully acknowledge and recognize the hard work of university teachers, and it is an important symbol of the identity and reputation of university teachers. "A lot of intellectuals put issues related to professional titles as the most important problems to be solved. That is because professional titles not only indicate the social recognition of their work achievements and academic levels, but also involve a series of issues related to compensations" (Gong, 1991, p.106). Academic identification classification can inspire teachers' inner sense of honor, meet their self-actualization needs, and achieve the incentives and restraints of the teachers. At the same time, position level is the basis of the configuration of salary, benefits and other social resources. It also indirectly configures other social benefits, such as housing, medical care, business trip and other benefits in universities (Ye, 2009). Therefore, to sum up, in the early days of the founding

of new China, academic identification classification and resource allocation are the two most important functions of Chinese university professional title system.

New institutional Economists believe that, the institution provides a system of rules for people's activities to ensure the equality of access to resources and the predictability to get the program. The system itself is an incentive mechanism (North, 2002). University teachers' professional title system stimulates university teachers' enthusiasm and initiative in academic production through benefit mechanism and institutional promotion channels and through benefit loss such as punishing measures of promotion failure or appointment failure to suppress the occurrence behavior which does not meet the organization's objectives (Ye, 2009). With the changes in the social environment, the liquidity of personnel and funding in various fields and departments has been greatly enhanced. University teachers' professional title system has gradually changed from the function of static academic identification classification and resource allocation to the function of dynamic performance management and incentive restraints, and its way contains three main points: first, it introduces external competition and make university teaching positions public and publicly recruit teachers; second, it limits the appointment of the university's own students and optimizes the teachers' academic structure; finally, it implements probation system, tenure system and performance appraisal system (Ye, 2009).

Ye Fenmei has a more comprehensive view of the function of professional title policy. She conducts a structural anatomy of the function of university professional title policy. She thinks academic identification classification, resource allocation, performance management, incentive restraints and value-orientation are the five functions of university teachers' professional title system. Based on the "five functions", some scholars (Liu, 2011) point out that the state of professional title assessment ought to play the function of incentive and classification and screening through the value-orientation. However, the real state is that current university professional title assessment has been deeply alienated and there is a structural flaw. Professional title assessment has become a battlefield to pursue material interests and a symbolic arena to acquire titles and reputation, but it has not become an academic playing field where truth is discussed and knowledge is updated. Such structural flaw has deeply affected teachers and students: When teachers are faced with professional title pressure and have to conduct research activities "for academic purpose", students are already far away from the center of teachers' work. Thus, knowledge education based on classroom is becoming scarce and moral and literacy education with word education and behavior teaching as the basic approach is even more difficult to fulfil. Therefore, the school is full of disorder, tension, and

even violence. Students are psychologically vulnerable and their thinking is negative and decadent. They don't have stable expectations on their own future. These have become general and inevitable phenomena in the field of higher education (Liu, 2011). The consequences caused by these are just as Bi (2005) puts it, "the educational system bears the function of social equity, but in fact it has become a permanent source of collective disappointment and potential social exclusion."

2.3 Mechanism Change: From Administrative Oriented to Academic Oriented

In the early days of the founding of new China, in the higher education field in our country, we conducted a highly centralized planned management system. Under this management model, the determination and promotion of university teachers' professional titles had an obvious administrative centralized color, specifically manifesting in the administrative feature of the accreditation authorities, the administrative centralization of the assessment powers and the administrative model of the accreditation activities (Ye, 2009).

In 2000, the Ministry of Personnel issued "Implementation Opinions regarding further Deepening Personnel System Reforms in Universities and Colleges" which points out the objectives to deepen the personnel system reforms in universities and colleges are: through the standardization of the government and its department as well as the responsible limitations of university executive departments and higher educational institutes, to rationalize the relationship between the governmental departments and higher educational institutes, to decentralize administrative authority, to implement the autonomy of higher educational institutions and to create a favorable social environment for the reform and development of higher educational institutions; to gradually establish a new personnel management system which fits the characteristics of universities and colleges and in which universities can independently recruit teachers, teachers can freely choose their position, the government supervise under the law, and the supporting measures are complete. Since then, university teachers' professional title accreditation has gradually changes from administrative centralized control to academic-oriented decentralized management: Each university gradually establishes academic accreditation department, such as the appointment committee and the professors' committee; in the process of university teachers' professional title accreditation, the government, the university and the teacher have their own division of powers and they each execute their different powers.

2.4 Transition Model: From a Mandatory Institutional Transition to an Induced Institutional Transition

Mandatory institutional transition and induced institutional transition is two typical institutional transition models of

new institutional economics. Mandatory institutional transition is presented and implemented by government commands and laws and it is a top-down process of institutional transition (Scott, 1991). Kang (2004) points out that: studying the characteristics of the transition of higher education systems since the reform of China, we always have the strong impression that the government was a strong leader guide the reforms. As an important part of the management system of higher education, the transition of university teachers' professional title system also shows the feature of significant mandatory institutional transition mode, and its establishment, development and changes and even suspension are pushed by policies, regulations, department documents and meeting spirits supplied by the government (Ye, 2009). Since the late 1990s, competition in terms of students, teachers, and funds among foreign and domestic universities has become more and more fierce. Universities gradually change from reforms mandatorily promoted by the government to active innovative new systems to respond to the challenges they are faced within their development. In 2003, teaching reform of Peking University with "deliberative democracy color", China's first launch of a tenured professor appointment system in East China Normal University and Nanjing University and the open recruitment of senior teacher positions in Nanjing University and other colleges and universities indicate the significant change of university teachers' professional title system from a compulsory institutional transition to an induced institutional transition (Ye, 2009).

Numerous studies describe the characteristics of changes of university professional title policy from the connotation, function, mechanism, and model and other aspects, but they mostly are from a macro-speculative perspective and there are few quantitative researches and qualitative researches. There is little useful first-hand data and fresh cases which reflect what aspects of Chinese university professional title policy have been changed, how it has changed, what effect it has triggered, and whether the teachers' academic motivation, academic contribution and satisfaction are promoted as expected, and there is very little microscopic study on this subject. Many teachers are faced with the dilemma of teaching and research. Are academic culture of Instrumental rationality and academic misconduct occurring frequently byproducts in the inevitable stage of historical development or bad products of professional title policy change? More questions should enter the vision of researchers.

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