Audit Culture with Chinese Characteristics?

Returnee Scholars' Perception of Chinese Higher Education.

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The idea of audit, originated from financial regulation, has been introduced into public sectors to rank and assess professional performance against bureaucratic benchmarks and economic targets in response to organizational failure either due to inefficacy (low quality) or scandals (Power 2007: 3, Shore 2008, Shore and Wright 1999). The past two decades have witnessed an expansion of audit culture in an increasingly wide range of professional domains and social life, and especially in public sectors such as higher education in different countries (e.g., Brenneis et al. 2005). Audit has consequently become a central organizing principle in the governance and management of human conduct, which has consequently created a kind of relationships, habits and practices (Shore 2008).

Whilst the idea of audit culture has acquired uncontestable legitimacy as a new regime operated by bureaucrats and experts to promote economic efficiency by means of evaluating accountability with selective performance indicators, it has caused severe consequences too. These consequences are essentially caused by ‘a slippage between audit as a method of financial verification and bookkeeping, and audit as a generalized model (and technology) of governance’ (Shore 2008: 290). On the institutional level, it is claimed to be eroding professional autonomy and creativity by reducing professional relations to crude, quantifiable and ‘inspectable,’ or scientistic, templates whilst facilitating fraud, mismanagement and waste of public money, that is, efficiency-hindering or counterproductive practices. On the individual level, it is supposedly turning scholars into docile auditable bodies whilst inviting generating workloads and stress-related illness for these ‘auditees’ (Cooper 2001, Kipnis 2008, Shore 2008, Shore and Wright 1999, Sparkes 2007, Strathern 1997).

Furthermore, audit has not led to transparency, as claimed by its proponents, but to mistrust between auditors and auditees, and among auditees while a policing regime of coercive commensurability (Brenneis et al. 2005: 3) has emerged concomitantly. This has given rise to an ultimate concern about the erosion of civil liberties through the increasing power of the state (Kipnis 2008, Shore 2008). Yet, given its progressive ideas of transparency, quality and accountability, the legitimacy of audit culture is hard to challenge on a moral ground (Shore 2008, Shore and Wright 1999).

Whilst this audit culture is uncritically associated with Western neoliberalism (for instance, Shore and Wright 1999, Shore 2008, Strathern 2000), a few scholars have challenged this association by arguing that marketization or privatization in other parts of the world is not necessarily a result of neoliberalism travelling to, for example, China (Nonini 2008), and that some elements of audit have been introduced in China earlier, during its different historical periods (Kipnis 2008). Nonetheless, when marketization has plausibly become irreversible, to have a globally competitive higher education system in a knowledge-economy-driven world has also become a prioritized goal of the Chinese state, against its old education system under planned economy. Therefore, whether or to what extent Chinese higher education is associated with the audit regime is largely a call for

an empirically grounded examination of the transformation of higher education in China.

Chinese higher education in transition.

To create world-class universities, market discipline has been introduced into the management of higher education in China. The state has embarked upon two key programmes among other initiatives, the 211 and 985 projects, in the mid-1990s to subsidize a certain number of selected universities or disciplines to make them globally competitive (Song and Liao 2004, Wang 2008). To enter these projects does not merely mean (much) more financial subsidies from governments at various levels; it can also significantly improve the position of a university on the ranking ladder while promoting its public profile. This will in turn enable the university to attract more investments from other sources and more applications from potential students (Song and Liao 2004, Wang 2008).

In spite of a market logic behind these initiatives, however, the *telos* of the Communist Party is to seek control over new institutional forms of *economic* power (Nonini 2008: 156). This has made administrative forces play a more important role in the determination of which universities are eligible to enter either project. For instance, to consider a university for the more selective and financially more injected 985 project, the government does not only look at its academic standing, but also pays close attention to its influence on the government, as well as considering the issue of balance between regions (Song and Liao 2004). These flexible criteria always mean a largely invisible negotiation between the government and universities concerned. The way of selecting universities and the sequential benefits they bring in to the winners have unsurprisingly invited fierce competition between (especially elite) universities. This has granted the government more power in resource distribution, and correspondingly places universities in a (more) subjugated position (Song and Liao 2004).

When more investment is made, more academic output is expected. A new assessment system to render academic performance accountable has been introduced in many (especially) elite universities. Contrary to the previous policy

of ‘iron bowl’ (a permanent job with a secure package of social welfare), many institutes have adopted a policy of making new academic appointees a contracted, rather than a permanent, faculty member, initially on a three to five years’ basis. After appointment, an assessment system is carried out every year or every semester to measure academic performance. The results of assessment are converted into credits at the end of the academic year, which are directly connected to cash rewards, reputable titles or otherwise provided by the institution or other state or social agencies. After several years’ continuous assessment, these credits are eventually taken to measure whether one has reached the standard for promotion. Yet, to avoid ruining *guanxi* (personal ties or relationships with people concerned or in power, that is, ‘the gift economy,’ in Yang’s [2002] terms), those who cannot meet the standard will usually not be fired unless something very unreasonable happened that is jeopardizing the credibility of the institute.

The major indicators measuring academic performance primarily include research (funded projects and publications) and teaching. The criteria for teaching are class hours or the number of courses offered. For making measurable criteria, scholarly journals are stratified into different ranks. The criterion for the stratification of English-language journals is simply to look at whether a journal is Isi-rated, while the categorization of Chinese-language journals is largely related to the bureaucratic status of every journal, reflecting the bureaucratic hierarchy of the academic community. That is, if a journal is owned by a state agency at the national level, such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Cas) or the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Cass), or a prestigious university such as Beijing (Peking) University or Qinghua (Tsinghua) University, it is much more likely to be placed in the highest-rank category.

However, the categorization of Chinese-language journals was essentially a copy of the Isi system when Nanjing University in the Jiangsu province introduced sci (science citation index) at the end of the 1980s as a set of ‘objective’ criteria to assess academic performance of its faculty members against the cronyism-dominated Chinese academic community. The system was soon adopted by other elite universities, followed by the creation of China’s sci and ssci (social science citation index) systems, Csci and Cssci.

In a similar vein, research funds are categorized into more prestigious ‘vertical’ and less prestigious ‘horizontal’ types, with the former referring to funds provided by national (the most prestigious) or provincial agencies, and the latter primarily referring to those offered by enterprises or other social agencies. Outstanding performance in either fund-raising or publication may receive generous cash rewards and/or honorable titles from the University and/or the state agencies at different levels. Research funding, publications and reputable titles form the core part in the assessment and ranking of universities carried out by governmental departments of education at different levels.

Another strategy to build world-class universities for the state is to improve its human capital. China thus has joined in global competition for talented people by initiating a number of programs to attract Chinese scholars from reputable overseas institutions. Various programs initiated by agencies at national, provincial and university levels offer receivers/appointees an honorable title beyond the regular ranking system, coupled with a (usually) generous financial package. A recent such program is what is known as *qianren jihua* (the ‘thousand talents’ program), embarked upon and led by the Department of Organization of the Ccp (Chinese Communist Party) Central Committee, aiming to attract outstanding people from overseas to raise the level of research and improve the academic environment of China (Cao 2009, Xinhua Wang 2009).

However, whilst China has been seen to attract a growing number of returnee scholars, continued negative cases regarding returnees have shocked the public too. On 17 September 2009, a 32-year-old returnee scholar at Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, was found to have committed suicide. In his suicide note, he depicted the Chinese academic community as ‘brutal, untrustworthy and merciless.’ In May 2006, a top returnee computer scientist at Shanghai Jiaotong University was confirmed by the government as having conducted faked research by stealing his powerful dsp chip design (*Hanxin*) from a foreign company that had been supported by the government with an accumulative amount of over one billion yuan (Barboza 2006). His misconduct aroused a hot debate on the reasons behind rampant frauds in the Chinese academic community, and 78.8% of voters in an online survey attributed them to institutional deficiencies of China.

The two cases have provoked a deep concern with and a questioning of the Chinese academic environment, particularly returnees' relationships with it (Cao 2008, Cheng Li 2007, He Li 2006, Louie 2006, Saxenian 2006, Wadhwa et al. 2009, Xu 2009, Zweig et al. 1995, Zweig 1997, Zweig et al. 2004, 2007). As Cao (2008) suggests, whilst personal factors, such as low salaries and problems of education for children, all play a role in the big question of 'to return or not to return,' the more important factors that preclude overseas academics from returning are those embedded within Chinese institutions. That is, the importance of *guanxi*, the high opportunity cost in career development, taboos in social-science research, and rampant misconduct in the Chinese scientific community.

Returnee scholars, given their considerable experience and knowledge regarding both domestic and overseas higher-education systems, are able to evaluate the Chinese educational system in a comparative perspective. In what follows, I consider returnees' perception of the Chinese higher education against its exogenous environment to explore whether Chinese higher education is undergoing an auditing process, and if it is, whether it is different from or similar to what has been observed in the West.

Quantity, quality and resources.

The criteria for assessment were acutely debated and criticized by almost every returnee I interviewed, who basically thought that this assessment system was not raising the level of research or teaching as expected. Instead, it was felt to be ruining the academic ethos. This is especially salient in the system that was said by most of my informants primarily to focus on quantity rather than quality, driven by a paper-production industry. This lack of reasonability is particularly reflected in the ignorance in the adoption of the impact factor system, which was caused by it being bureaucratized by assessors, who 'do not know [about the research field], so the only thing they can do is quantification.' The system was hence thought to have developed into a very inflexible and so unreasonable criterion.

Information revealed in returnees' remarks is that the ignorant or unreasonable assessors are their domestically-trained colleagues and administrators. These

assessors were further considered to be ignorant basically in two directions. They either tended to separate research from practicality, in particular in some professional fields such as education and management, or lacked enthusiasm for longer-term research that cannot bring immediate tangible values, especially in some foundational fields. Driven by ‘unreasonable’ criteria, domestic scholars were in particular said to be more likely to produce more ‘rubbish’ papers (for example, ‘with very crap data’), even though they know ‘what they are producing is just like rubbish.’ In this atmosphere, more and more cases of misconduct in research, such as plagiarism and forgery of data, have been found among scholars. The epidemic of academic misconduct has reached such a scope that a North-America-educated and China-based Chinese scholar was led to start a website to monitor and expose various forms of misconduct. In this atmosphere, my informants stated that there was a serious lack of passion or enthusiasm for intellectual inquiries among many domestic academics: as long as they could get promoted, get more funds, become well-known, whether their teaching or research had value to either the larger society or the academic community was largely absent from their agenda.

This publication industry inevitably made teaching its victim. Since there was no obvious credit that was directly associated with the quality of teaching, to meet teaching requirements was almost purely to meet a standard of quantity, and this invited serious criticism from my returnee informants as they saw that the system was devaluing teaching and, consequently, good instructors.

While misconduct among domestic scholars was becoming a more serious problem, many returnee scholars, by contrast, encountered severe difficulties as a result of their insistence on their professional ethics. Their philosophy usually made them appear negatively in comparison with those paper-producers, and this disastrously lowered their assessors’ views of them. That is, they would be viewed merely as a waste of resources.

The reductionism of organizational function to accountability is exactly a misplaced faith in techniques of audit and accounting, as Shore has criticized, that is in fact destroying the very organizations we care about (2008: 291). In a similar tone, a news report, soon after the 2010-2011 Cssci had been announced

at the end of 2009, has unmasked bureaucratic hegemony, mismanagement and frauds in the process of production and coercive implementation of the system. Yet an interesting distinction between returnees in science or economics and social sciences or humanities is observable. Whilst the former criticized the bureaucratization of the impact-factor system in the hope of a ‘correct’ use of it, the latter questioned its legitimacy in view of how, and by whom, it was produced.

Since more papers are understood by many to bring more resources in turn, domestically-trained scholars were said to be overwhelmingly concerned with the use of resources. Thus, to abuse power for personal gains in form of exchange of resources with others in power, monopolization of resources, or nepotism could occur at times. It was reported by the *Yangtze Daily* that 90% of the National Awards for Famous Teachers in Higher Education in 2009 went to those senior academics that held administrative power of various types (Zhu 2009). The report called at the end for a de-bureaucratization of higher education to return to the basic idea of the modern university, that is, disinterested ‘higher learning.’ A returnee thus questioned why this award was still allowed to exist as its primary purpose had been damagingly altered already.

The absence of the ‘invisible college.’

Under the pressure of publication, many domestic scholars were said not to be interested in communication due to a lack of time. A more important reason might have been that in the eyes of several informants, many domestic scholars had limited interest or passion for their academic career—a situation which was unlikely to be found in an academic community with a continuing exchange-of-mind and/or debate environment. This made most returnee scholars feel a desperate need for an ‘invisible college,’ in which they, based on shared common paradigms, were able to ‘exchange information and ideas to advance scientific knowledge, on how to conduct research and to seek help when needed’ (Cao 2008: 341). This was a more serious problem for the returnees in the social sciences and humanities, who are largely working with ideas and societies rather than with a purely physical world.

Furthermore, in a communication, disagreements are hard to avoid. This would make some domestic scholars feel insulted. This worry about being insulted was pointed out by an informant to be another barrier preventing domestic scholars from communication with returnees.

In fact, the deeper reason for domestic scholars to reject communication revealed in my informants' remarks laid in their worry and scramble for resources. In the mindset of domestic scholars, sharing their work would be risking his/her new idea(s) being taken away or inviting criticism of their research, which would mean a low view of their research quality. This showed the vulnerability of domestic scholars, who lacked confidence in their research especially in comparison with their returnee colleagues, and hence challenges to their superiority or 'face' were closely watched. As a result, to secure a space to gain resources in competition with returnees, many domestically-trained (largely senior) scholars 'employed a protective screen,' in a returnee's words, blocking communication channels and so transparency to safeguard their vested or potential interest.

Both worry and scramble for resources and uncommunicative culture together formed the very mentality of mistrust between colleagues, and fractions were formed among those who had shared interest and were also 'loyal' to the head of the fraction even if they knew the head was conducting wrongdoings. Certainly, this lack of communication was closely associated with conventional Chinese paternalism, in which equal communication or debate between citizens is unnecessary as ideas or policies are transmitted bureaucratically or vertically to those in lower positions to practice or implement. In other words, communication or debate tends to be regarded as insult, challenge or threat even if no direct scramble for resources is involved, which has prevented transparency and possible challenge to those in power (see Kong 2009). Furthermore, this tendency to avoid disagreements or diversity is also ingrained in the *guanxi* culture, which, at least, aims to keep people's relationships in harmony and uniformity and, at most, mutually benefits one another through either positive or negative ways when necessary. Paternalism and *guanxixue* together have formed intricate and complex social relations to safeguard the interests of 'Us.'

In attempt to create an ‘invisible college’, some informants tried to organize a communication-oriented platform such as a reading group or a seminar serial, but found it difficult primarily because of a lack of communicative culture on the one hand and, on the other, a lack of support or assistance from the institution unless some positive effect was clearly shown.

Indeed, when driving academics to become paper-producers, providing a supportive community is not in the particular interest of an institute. What an institute is interested in is whether it can get more resources and move upward the ranking ladder with a higher public profile. That is, whether it is accountable to the government and so accepted by and popular with the public. That is why, in a returnee’s words, what the administration of Chinese universities was concerned with most nowadays was whether it looked good. This ‘looking good’ idea has driven universities to pay close attention to those visible aspects such as the number of publications, appointed (overseas) talents, the amount of funding and reputable titles acquired, and the degree to which campus appeared to be beautiful. This has made Chinese universities highly skilful at staged performance, or formalism (see Kipnis 2008, Shore and Wight 1999), a result of the convergence of the modern auditing regime and the conventional paternalism in which inferior subjects must always be ready for (external) superiors’ inspection.

Directed by this ‘looking good’ idea, criticism or punishment of those who, deliberately or unconsciously, are thought to be damaging the ‘face’ of the institute became a widely known practice conducted by powerful administrators. On the contrary, those who knew how to please the leaders by talking boastfully were regarded by the latter as indispensable. Indeed, to present achievement for an institute is fundamentally to subject to and reinforce the bureaucratization of the social system of the auditing regime rather than to come to terms with ethics and laws of academic research (Chen 2005), let alone the creation of an ‘invisible college.’

The hierarchization of the academic community.

In this devastating environment, returnee scholars fared very differently. Irrespective of individual diligence, the major factors that determined returnees' conditions included their academic subject, their relationship with their current employer or superior, and whether their leader was capable of taking, and also willing to take, responsibility for creating an appropriate environment for his/her (especially returnee) colleagues. On both national and institute levels, the disciplines that were (much) more likely to obtain a substantial support both in forms of finance and administration include sciences and economics. A commonality shared by these subjects is the type of knowledge they produce in comparison with most subjects in the humanities and social sciences, namely, *instrumental* knowledge vis-à-vis *practical* and *emancipatory* knowledge, in Habermas's (1972) identification of basically three cognitive areas where interests generate knowledge[1].

To get substantial support from the social system to instrumental knowledge is in parallel with the very reductive tendency of audit culture towards 'the idea of the university as a transnational corporate enterprise whose function is to provide a skilled workforce and relevant and usable research for the new Global Knowledge Economy.' This is opposed to the traditional liberal/Enlightenment idea of the University that pursues 'higher learning' (Brenneis et al. 2005: 2).

On the contrary, returnees in the social sciences and humanities were not only encountering material shortages for their research, but also facing more difficulties in publication of or getting funding for their research. This is primarily due to a censorship both on the national and institute levels, as Cao (2008) has similarly observed. This means that it would be difficult for them to obtain funds or get their research published if they did not adjust or even totally shift their research to what would be considered in line with the ideology of the Party-State. This political control created difficulties for returnees in these fields to engage independently and fully with their research.

Different treatments and status received by different subjects and academics have epitomized China's uneasy synthesis of liberalizing economy while maintaining a monopoly of political power and ideological legitimacy, as well as exercising control over economic power (Nonini 2008: 156). Different policies

have resulted in a widening gap between Chinese and overseas scholars in the social sciences and humanities despite China's impressive performance in certain science fields, as an Lse professor claimed to me after a one-year stay in a few top Chinese universities.

Largely affected by their differential status, returnees responded differently to their environment. Almost without exception, returnees in the social sciences and humanities held a cynical and/or nihilistic view towards their environment (in spite of the degree to which this varied), and were quite disengaging or would withdraw from their academic community as long as this was possible. Conversely, almost all returnees in sciences and economics appeared to be quite satisfied with their current or even future conditions, and were also in the mood of performing academically well. In the explanation of their satisfying mentality, two of them attributed their gain to the demand from either the state or the market for their expertise.

What is going on in Chinese universities partly resonates with the audit regime in higher education in Western countries. However, based on this study, I would suggest that this similarity between Chinese and Western higher education is much a result of the convergence of governing patterns between China and the West in a globalizing era. China's paternalistic bureaucracy has been joined by a market (accountability) regime and, further, a new public management derived from the West. In the meantime, the economic hegemony in the West has developed into paternalistic governance as a result of the erosion of neo-liberalism. The two forces serve as the respective foundation for each other on the one hand, and reinforce each other in the process of their alliance on the other. It has eventually formed what Habermas terms mutually colluded economic and administrative rationalization in his insightful observation of the one-sided process of modernization in contemporary (industrialized) societies (1984).

The growing intervention of economic and administrative rationalization in the life-world of Chinese academics, however, has resulted in what one of my informants described as 'many, many irrational things,' ranging from cynicism

and suicide to formalism and various misconducts and abuse of power for personal gains on the one hand (see Kipnis 2008, Shore 2008) and, on the other, extruded autonomy of academics in the longer term. This is because the Chinese audit regime is not only guarded by a quantifiable scientism, but also by the ideological control of communism as well as a Confucian *guanxixue*, to form a new paternalistic governance, and thus is different from the neo-liberal audit culture.

An additional but related issue is that most returnees I interviewed seemed to pay little attention to academic autonomy, no matter who they were, 'the winners' or 'the losers.' These newly returned academics were increasingly losing their willingness and/or capacity to seriously engage with the fundamental direction of society, in spite of their disapproval of and divergence from over-bureaucratization, rampant misconduct or corruption in the academic community. Given the difficulties for academics to challenge the audit regime (Shore 2008: 291-292), it is in fact more urgent for returnee academics to consider seriously how to collectively create an independent invisible college whilst defending society against the very sovereignty that lies behind the aggressive intervention of formal systems instead of producing reductive criticism against domestic scholars when the whole academic community is seen to be colonized by this Chinese audit regime. Otherwise, who is able to claim she/he is a winner (especially) in the longer term?

Résumé

The idea of audit, originated from financial regulation, has been introduced into public sectors to rank and assess professional performance against bureaucratic benchmarks and economic targets in response to organizational failure either due to inefficacy (low quality) or scandals (Power 2007: 3, Shore 2008, Shore and Wright 1999). The past two decades have witnessed an ...

Notes

[1] Given the limited space, this is however a discipline-based simplistic application of Habermas's classification of knowledge.

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