

# The Mechanism and Ethics of Academic Promotion in China's Academia

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## Abstract

Academic promotion is one of the major approaches for maintaining and enhancing the quality and efficiency of higher education and research activities. While a variety of parameters influence the process of academic promotion, implementing an unbiased mechanism for academic promotion is an uphill task for policy makers. In this article, we argue that although Chinese academic institutions have a great contribution to the advancement of science in the world, their social and academic impacts are not sufficiently significant. This is mainly because of institutional drawbacks originated from the strong administrative power of governmental institutions. By expressing the view of Albert Einstein about the academic promotion and comparing Althoff and Harnack systems as two extreme approaches in the history of science policy-making in Germany, we have discussed that a peer review system with limited autonomous authorities could be an efficient mechanism for establishing impartial academic promotion and protecting professional ethics in China's academia.

## Keywords

Academic Promotion, Ethics, Policy, Higher Education, China

## 1. Introduction

Academic promotion means one's academic performance gets recognition in the real world. Winning academic recognition has a special significance for scholars: it indicates that one's research results are accepted by the academic community; it is the prerequisite for getting the corresponding professional prestige, social status and other resources (Mahat & Tatebe, 2019). Theoretically, the only criterion for academic recognition is one's academic contribution, which should be

determined by the academic community itself. However, in reality, academic promotion is not proportional to one's academic contributions, as many non-academic factors are involved in the process of academic recognition: Various social factors play a very important role. To establish a sound academic promotion mechanism and to prevent the violation of ethics is of major significance for the healthy development of China's academia.

For any research institution, regardless of size, impartiality is a very important factor. How to ensure impartiality in academic promotion is an important issue not only for the researcher, but also for high-level decision-makers (Smith et al., 2013). Theoretically, through academic autonomy, academia could decide how to enhance academic standards (Neave, 2012), but in the reality, the executive "staffs" (public servants) have too much power, resulting in many non-academic factors involved, seriously threatening the development of research. We must ask: What is the legitimate basis for the establishment of a fair scholarship system? What kind of institutional arrangement is reasonable for an academic institute? How to improve the current academic institutional arrangements, establish fair promotion mechanisms, and prevent the violation of professional ethics? In this paper, we discuss about two different systems of policymaking in the history of science and research policy management and argue that a mechanism based on peer review with limited academic autonomy could be a suitable mechanism for academic promotion assessment in China's academia.

## 2. Albert Einstein's Viewpoint about Academic Promotion

Let us quote a few paragraphs from Albert Einstein (Janssen et al., 2002). Einstein gave this speech in April 26, 1918, when the German Physics Society celebrated Max Planck's 60th birthday. The World War I was drawing to a close soon, although the Germans on the Eastern Front still held local advantage. Einstein said:

"In the temple of science are many mansions, and various indeed are they that dwell therein and the motives that have led them thither. Many take to science out of a joyful sense of superior intellectual power; science is their own special sport to which they look for vivid experience and the satisfaction of ambition; many others are to be found in the temple who have offered the products of their brains on this altar for purely utilitarian purposes. Were an angel of the Lord to come and drive all the people belonging to these two categories out of the temple, the assemblage would be seriously depleted, but there would still be some men, of both present and past times, left inside. Our Planck is one of them, and that is why we love him.

I am quite aware that we have just now light-heartedly expelled in imagination many excellent men who are largely, perhaps chiefly, responsible for the building of the temple of science; and in many cases our angel would find it a pretty ticklish job to decide. But of one thing I feel sure: if the types we have just expelled were the only types there were, the temple would never have come to be, any more than a forest can grow which consists of nothing but creepers. For these

people any sphere of human activity will do, if it comes to a point; whether they become engineers, officers, tradesmen, or scientists depends on circumstances. Now let us have another look at those who have found favor with the angel. Most of them are somewhat odd, uncommunicative, solitary fellows, really less like each other, in spite of these common characteristics, than the hosts of the rejected. What has brought them to the temple? That is a difficult question and no single answer will cover it.

To begin with, I believe with Schopenhauer that one of the strongest motives that lead men to art and science is escape from everyday life with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness, from the fetters of one's own ever shifting desires. A finely tempered nature longs to escape from personal life into the world of objective perception and thought; this desire may be compared with the townsman's irresistible longing to escape from his noisy, cramped surroundings into the silence of high mountains, where the eye ranges freely through the still, pure air and fondly traces out the restful contours apparently built for eternity."

Einstein was glad that he then did not take the college track, but work at the patent office. In his opinion, in order to get promotion, scholars were forced to write insignificant articles, which could affect their creativity.

Do Einstein's words have any implication for today's academic systems? Yes. As Einstein said, there are a variety of people engaged in the academic circle, each having his or her own motive. How do we use the same criteria to measure them especially in the process of promotion? Einstein described a very idealized situation, in fact, he found only very few people suitable, i.e. those who didn't pursue science for external reputation, social status and professional recognition, but only academic value of their own. For them, the biggest reward is not from the outside, but from their achievements. As Einstein said, also about Max Planck (Einstein, 1950), "A man to whom it has been given to bless the world with a great creative idea has no need for the praise of posterity. His very achievement has already conferred a higher boon upon him."

We all live in a secular environment, and inevitably get affected by the various kind of society evaluation. In fact, even Einstein himself could not escape from the niche which surrounded him. In the years from 1911 to 1914, Einstein constantly changed his working place, from associate professor at the University of Zurich, to full professor of the German University in Prague, and returned to his alma mater, ETH Zurich, as a full professor. He then went to Berlin as professor of the University of Berlin (have teaching right, but no obligation to teach), became member of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, as well director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics, as Max Planck and Walther Nernst had promised him. In fact, every one of us wants to have such a niche, where there is a fair mechanism for promotion, so that everyone can have his potential maximized.

### 3. Academic Promotion in Chinese Academic Institutions

Since the 1950s, the entire academic system in China has been basically established in order to satisfy the real needs of society. The academic fields are re-

quired to meet the economic and, especially, the political needs. Sociology, and some other disciplines which were considered bourgeois, were eliminated. Applied science which was needed for society was promoted, while fundamental research investment remained widely inadequate. In general, it can be said that the academic institutions were established according to social and political needs, rather than according to the inner logic of the disciplines themselves. This led to two consequences. On the one hand, it catered to the urgent need for the personnel training of society, on the other hand, because of excessive intervention by the administrative power, China's academic field developed abnormally. Only at the beginning of the 1980s, especially after the Reform and Opening Policy, there was a little improvement. However, due to the strong inertia of the traditional system, the autonomy of the academic field is still problematic. Moreover, due to the monopoly of resources and resource allocation, in some areas, the administrative involvement of the academic management is becoming stronger than before. Relying on executive management and not an academic autonomy became the norm (Ginsberg, 2011).

In order to obtain substantial resources from the government and win market shares (often a false market, such as various university rankings), academic institutions are using various quantitative indicators as yardsticks to measure the level of scholars, especially when the faculty members are facing academic promotion (Bienkowski et al., 2012). In order to get reputation, a series of competitive institutional arrangements are formed, aiming at an increase of productivity (Fox, 1983; Shin et al., 2011). To put too much emphasis on quantifiable outputs, is actually a short-sighted behavior which produces various negative effects.

Of course, mature academic institutions need sophisticated personnel services, but it's not easy to manage them. In reality, even intelligent machines can't meet the needs of the current quantitative evaluation. One of the top leading scientists of CAS published 57 articles per year, meaning that he could publish one paper per week. Like everybody else, this scholar's life could have been very colorful, but he was swayed by many external regulations. Unless you have a very determined will, you will be easily misled by those external provisions.

As it is well known, in China, some directors of government departments and academic institutions monopolize resources. The more they control the resources, the more powerful they are. As the designer and distributor of resources, the preferences and value judgments of those powerful superiors have strong influence on the behavior of academics. Their focus on short-term returns (performance) not only leads to unsustainable normal academic activities, but also undermines the spirit of self-exploration of the academic and the autonomy of the academic institutions. Academics become mechanical indicator chasers and manufacturers of "academic products". Although China's academic output has the second rank in the world, the ratio of influential papers is relatively small, and the academic influence and the social impact they bring is relatively limited. More seriously, rigid quantitative evaluation and resource allocation system dampen the scholar academic interests, and lead to the pursuit of

fame and fortune, by all means.

Also because of a too strong administrative power, basic academic autonomy is difficult to reach, and therefore some seemingly outrageous behaviors are actually the natural resistance from the academic circle. This means that the academic system has its institutional defect, so we first need to improve the system itself. Sometimes the aggressive behaviors reflect that the academic evaluation system has deviated from its formal trajectory, as in a society, crime (for example, theft) is certainly immoral, the criminals need to take the corresponding legal responsibility. But if there are criminals everywhere in a society, instead of seeking a temporary solution, we should improve our social system and reflect on what reason has caused this phenomenon. Without doing so, even if we have established the most stringent laws, it is impossible to prevent crime.

In today's China, using administrative power to intervene in academic work is still a very serious phenomenon, including excessive awards, excessive quantitative assessment, and inappropriate publication classification systems, all with strong profit-orientation approaches.

In any society, one can't get rid of the intervention of the governmental and administrative powers in academic activities. However, it should be modest. If intervention occurs too often or it is too strong, it will cause imbalance in the power structure. In order to establish an effective decision-making and management mechanisms within the academic circle, the best option is use the peer-review system (Mitroff & Chubin, 1979), but this must be based on the respect for individual scholars, and a relatively autonomous academic community as a prerequisite. If the evaluation of the academic activities is directly controlled by the administrative power, peer review will become a tool for external control (Harley et al., 2010).

Too many awards, too much selection and assessment from government and administrative bodies destroy the ecology of academic autonomy. Improper use of peer review undermines the credibility of the academic community from the inside. And the influence of the person who occupies academic resources is not proportional to his or her academic ability. Administrative forces should not be involved in the formation of "academic authority". Otherwise, an external logic subverts the inherent logic of academic scholarship.

#### 4. Two Extremes of Science Policy-Making Systems

A few years ago, there have been reports that in order to have someone successfully elected as academician candidate, some universities or institutes spent several million dollars on public relations, and credited the academician candidates with all other members' research findings.

How can we avoid such a situation? Either we believe in the existence of an omnipotent government representing the general will, or we believe there is a fully autonomous academic world with high academic ethics standards, which make the academic institutions not only fair but also efficient. However, in real-

ity neither case can exist.

In the history of science-policy of Germany, the so-called “Althoff System” and “Harnack Principle” (Vom Brocke & Hubert, 1996) are two examples of these two poles. Friedrich Althoff (1839-1908) was a perfect representative of the omnipotent government. During his position in the Prussian Ministry of Culture, he created a whole new university and research system of Germany. He was known as the “Bismarck of Prussian University”, forming the so-called “Althoff system”.

Althoff could simultaneously dictate to ten secretaries ten different replies. In order to get a fair evaluation for the promotion, he had many informants in the whole of Germany. When necessary, he also attended lectures personally. This was possible in a Germany at the end of 19th-century and the early period of 20th-century. But in China it is hardly possible, indeed impossible.

Althoff's reform was a top-down reform, which aimed at improving Germany's position in the world of science. The Althoff system's goal was efficiency of scientific activity, through changes as small as possible. During his tenure, he was involved in the vocations of a large number of important researchers such as Adolf von Harnack, Emil von Behring, Hermann Gunkel, Max Planck, Walther Nernst, Paul Ehrlich, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Ferdinand von Richthofen and Robert Koch. The University of Göttingen was largely through the work Althoff into a leading international center for mathematics and physics. In fact, Althoff system was very successful. In the first three decades of the 20th century, from 1901 to 1933, 31 Germans received the Nobel Prize in Natural Sciences, France 14, Britain 17. Althoff was known as the cradle of Nobel laureates, and got high praise from many famous scientists.

Filled with gratitude, wrote the Nobel laureate Paul Ehrlich in 1907 at Althoff: “I myself owe you both my entire career and the chance I had to bring my ideas to practical fruition. Shunted about as an assistant, forced into impossible conditions, totally ignored by the university, I thought myself quite useless. I never received a call to even the most minor position and was regarded as a person without a field—i.e., as totally useless. If you, with your strong hand and brilliant initiative, had not come to my aid and, in your untiring zeal and benevolent friendship, had not arranged a place where I might work, I would have been left to wither away entirely (Stern, 1999).”

Max Weber had both positive and negative opinions about Althoff and the Althoff system: “It is very difficult to talk about this man. He really was not just a good man in the specific sense of the word, but he was also a man of very broad point of view, ... In addition, in a sense, Althoff's contribution to German universities undoubtedly have eternal value. I am afraid that we can't find one person, more pure than him, who with unimaginable patriotism inspired the characters ... in the technical management level, in relation to the management all aspects of the resource and the academy, he brought the Prussian university to a very high level, and in terms of personnel management, he insisted above all ‘parochialism patriotism’, rather than ‘patriarch doctrine’ .... But ... the means

with which worked the Prussian educational administration were the most ruthless conceivable ... The influence of Althoff's system 'human treatment' has worked directly corrupting 'the young' (Shils, 1973)."

Althoff's drastic reform also created tensions between him, the universities, and the professors. The critics from the university professors focused on his destruction of "academic autonomy" and his style of work. Althoff let professors waiting for him in the unheated parlor for ten hours! Russell McCormach's non-fiction novel *Night Thought of a Classical Physicist* very vividly describe this (McCormach, 1982). Althoff's management of the University is a typical "rule of man", with a certain abuse of power. In order to achieve his objectives, he put on cunning and machinations of officialdom. On the promotion of professor, he repeatedly rejected recommendations from the universities and colleges, the views of the universities and colleges have not been respected. Actually, he did not put too much effort, but not enough effort into a university reform: He didn't change the power base (Shils & Altbach, 1997).

The Harnack Principle (Nowak, 2003) is another extreme. First, choose a famous and exceptional director for an institute, then leave it to the director to set up the organizational structure. This principle, which is the fundamental principle of the Max Planck Society in Germany, takes its name from the first director of Kaiser Wilhelm Society. Government departments are only responsible for financial supply and they would no longer intervene the research orientations, according to the motto, "let academic autonomy be".

Based on this principle (Max Planck Society, 2009), the heads of research departments of Max Planck Society do not follow research plans determined by market or organization needs; instead, they follow their own tuitions. In this system, the criterion for resource allocation is based on the intellectual achievements of the Society's principal investigators and their team members, and the overall performance of institutes is not the main factor. Further, the funding policies in his system are based on a profound leap of faith and high-trust principle.

Given the nature of human beings, we should not be too idealistic. The academic systems are no exception. We can't simply copy the experience of Germany or the United States. No institution can prevent power abuse totally, but each institution can define a bottom line of good governance. For the individual researcher, "doing our own scientific research", regardless of external assessment, is perhaps the most helpless choice, but it is also the best way to maintain one's peaceful mind.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, this article highlights some deficiencies of the current mechanisms of the academic promotion in China's academia and proposes a mechanism based on peer review with limited academic autonomy. While superfluous evaluations of highly administrative governmental institutions adversely affect the ecology of academic autonomy, an inappropriate usage of peer review system

will also demote the credibility of academic communities. In the view of Einstein, forcing scholars to publish insignificant papers for getting promotion will negatively influence their creativity. In order to clarify the characteristics of the two extremes of approaches for academic promotions (purely omnipotent governmental decision making and fully autonomous academic institutions), we exemplified Althoff and Harnack systems as two extremes in the science-policy history of Germany.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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