

Perceptions of Tenure: Faculty Development Issues in U.S. Leadership Development Programmes



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Abstract This chapter examines Chinese HEI leaders' perceptions of tenure in American HEIs. A sample of four Chinese HEI leaders was selected from those who attended U.S. leadership development programmes between 2013 and 2017. Data were collected through four interviews and four learning reports. The leaders spoke highly of the third-party reviews and the professionalism of the American faculties. While they misunderstood the real meaning of tenure; they admired the achievements of American HEIs in applying tenure but were concerned about difficulties in applying the tenure system in their own HEIs. They pointed out that tenure might not solve all the problems experienced in Chinese HEIs. There was a mis-comparison between elite American HEIs and non-elite Chinese HEIs due to the programme arrangements. We argue that benchmarking is needed in the future in order to match the profile of Chinese HEI leaders to appropriate universities in the U.S.

Keywords Tenure · Faculty · Chinese HEI leaders · U.S. leadership development programmes

1 Introduction

Tenure is an important mechanism in faculty development in American higher education (HE). The definition of tenure is 'status granted to an employee, usually after a probationary period, indicating that the position or employment is permanent' (Online Dictionary, 2020). It is a 'basic concept that faculty members who have served a proper period of apprenticeship shall enjoy security in their posts and be subject to removal only for "adequate cause"' (Byse & Joughin, 1959, p. v). The original purpose of tenure was to codify 'a permanent, professional relationship between

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faculty members and their institutional employers, rewarding those who fulfil the terms of their probation' (Allen, 2000, p. 96). While tenure is a central feature of famous and elite higher education institutions (HEIs), for non-elite colleges, tenure is a less researched topic. Wolf-Wendel et al. (2007) report that 'tenure appears to be a less salient issue for community college faculty than for faculty at other types of colleges and HEIs' (p. 259). Of the 62 public two-year colleges in Texas scrutinised in Waller and Davis's (2006) study, '26 institutions had some type of tenure system and 36 institutions had no official tenure systems'. Nationwide, 'to find accurate, up-to-date data on how many community colleges have a tenure system' is very difficult (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2007, p. 259). Although macroscopic data is not available, most young, part-time community college faculty members desire full-time tenure-track positions (Jacoby, 2005; Kater & Levin, 2005). Although tenure should be guaranteed by an official procedure, Olivas (2006) points out that many community colleges offer de facto tenure, which means tenure is granted based on the institution's custom or practice without an official procedure.

In China, tenure has been a hot topic for the last two decades. Currently, many Chinese research HEIs apply a tenured system for newly-employed faculty members (Lin & Xue, 2020). But what about the non-elite HEIs? What did Chinese leaders of non-elite HEIs learn of tenure from the American HEIs? How did they perceive this controversial but efficient system? How do they evaluate its shortcomings when considering applying the tenure system in China? To the best of our knowledge, there is little literature on tenure in Chinese non-elite HEIs. Therefore, this chapter provides a specific case in which Chinese HEI leaders learned of the tenure system during overseas leadership development programmes in the U.S, which are parts of overseas leadership development programmes (MoE, 2012). In this chapter, we focus on the non-elite Chinese HEIs from which our participants came.

2 Tenure in HEIs

2.1 *Tenure in American HEIs*

Tenure was first implemented at the University of Wisconsin in the early part of the twentieth century when 'Wisconsin at the time was a stronghold of "LaFollette progressivism," and life tenure for professors was viewed as essential if they were to be able to express heterodox views without fear of political reprisal' (Kennedy, 1997, p. 134).

In 1940, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) published its Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, which is seen as the most important document of the tenure system (Allen, 2000). In this statement, tenure is defined as 'a means to certain ends; specifically: (1) freedom of teaching and research and of extramural activities, and (2) a sufficient degree of economic security to make the profession attractive to men and women of ability' (AAUP, 1940). The AAUP

actively monitored HEIs for ‘violations of tenure and academic freedom policies, and censure from the group is a substantial disincentive to cavalier institutional treatment of these matters’ (Kennedy, 1997, p. 125).

But problems with tenure never end. First, the responsibility of the tenured academics is also questioned. ‘Before tenure he is accountable only to his like-minded peers, after tenure he is accountable to no one, least of all the public or university supporters paying his salary’ (Arney, 1995, p. 122). Post-tenure evaluation was identified as one of the most pressing needs facing higher education. Licata and Andrews (1990) reported that though 70% of the respondents indicated that a system existed on their respective campuses for formal evaluation of tenured academics, two thirds of them were “critical of post-tenure evaluation as not being effective in relationship to its purpose” (p. 47). Second, the uncapping of mandatory retirement brought financial stringency (Kennedy, 1997). Third, pre-tenure evaluation forces junior faculty to “prioritize research and grant activity over teaching and serving students” (Gonzales, 2014). This is especially inevitable in elite research universities where teaching or student-faculty relations are often described as secondary concerns (Terosky, 2005). Fourth, non-tenured positions—the by-products of the tenure system—have also become a problem. Since 1995, there has been ‘a significant growth in the share of faculty members at American colleges and HEIs that are employed in part-time or full-time non-tenure-track positions’ (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005, p. 647). This has happened ‘due to the growing financial pressures faced by public and private HEIs, coupled with the lower cost of non-tenure-track faculty members’ (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005, p. 647). The lower salaries and benefits of contingent faculty members prompts criticism (Ehrenberg & Zhang, 2005).

2.2 *Tenure in Chinese HEIs*

Originally, Chinese HEIs applied the ‘public official’ personnel system. Chinese HEI faculty members were seen as bureaucratic officials (Zhang, 2013). A public official cannot be fired easily, even if one should refuse to fulfil his or her appointed responsibilities (Yi, 2013). This system can be understood as a de facto tenure system, which offers faculty members lifelong positions without probation periods (Zhong & Li, 2009).

Top research HEIs have led tenure reform in China. Tsinghua University first introduced the idea of ‘up or out’ in 1993, but it was later defeated by a lack of support from the environment (Lv et al., 2019). Sun Yat-sen University first applied a faculty contract that distinguished between long-term and temporary employment in 2003 (Yao & Li, 2004). Peking University tried to implement a tenure system reform in 2003 but encountered very sharp criticism and desisted. However, ten years later, in 2014, when multiple HEIs in China simultaneously carried out a tenure reform, most faculty members kept silent and opted in (Lin & Xue, 2020).

Although forced to accept the tenure system, Chinese scholars have reflected in depth on tenure. Researchers question whether the American system of tenure would

match the needs of Chinese HEIs. The aim in applying the tenure system to Chinese HEIs and its by-products were examined (Yue, 2015), the reasons why the American tenure system could be applied only with difficulty in Chinese regional HEIs were investigated (Xia & Wang, 2016). Tenure system reform in China's universities contains the institutional logic of performance management, competition orientation and internationalization, and may induce potential risks such as academic utilitarianism, generalization of academic tournament and weakening of local academy (Wang, 2021). It also leads to a series of problems, including a complex game of interests among the various stakeholders, the lack of support for pre-employed teachers as well as protection for unemployed teachers, and stimulation of seeking quick success and instant benefits before tenured, and becoming lazy after tenure (Zhu, 2021). Regardless of those debates, little attention was paid to the process that Chinese HEI leaders learned of tenure, a research gap we are aiming to fulfilled in this chapter.

3 Methods

This section describes the methods applied in the study. We first introduce the U.S. leadership development programmes. The data collection included interviews and learning reports. The data analysis was done through conventional qualitative content analysis.

3.1 The U.S. Leadership Development Programmes

The U.S. leadership development programmes are part of the overseas leadership development programmes. Between 2012 and 2018, the MoE sent 425 Chinese HEI leaders to attend 20 leadership development programmes in the U.S. The themes covered included: (1) Governance structure and university development, (2) Human resources and faculty development, (3) University governance and student affairs, (4) Student-centred teaching service system, and (5) First-class university and first-class discipline construction. The first three were organised by the NAEA, and the latter two by the CEAIE. In this chapter, we focus on programmes with themes 1 and 2, both of which were organised by the NAEA. Both theme 1 and theme 2 were offered by ten U.S. HEIs (Table 1).

3.2 Data Collection

The data for this qualitative study included four individual interviews and four learning reports. Two participants attended U.S. leadership development programmes

Table 1 Themes and providers of U.S. leadership development programmes

Programme theme	Programme providers	
Human resource and faculty development	2013 UC Berkeley Pacific University California State University, Fullerton	2016 UC Berkeley UC Davis UC San Francisco UC Irvine UC Los Angeles Stanford University Golden Gate University San Jose State University
Governance structure and university development	2017 UC Berkeley UC Davis UC Riverside California State University Stanford University Golden Gate University California Institute of Technology Skyline College San Matteo college	

on the theme of ‘Human resource and faculty development’ in 2013 and 2016 respectively, and two took the U.S. leadership development programme on the theme of ‘Governance structure and university development’ in 2017 in the same group.

Between April and November 2018, *Author 2* interviewed the four participants at their home HEIs. The duration of the interviews varied from 35 to 120 *min*. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese. After the interviews, *Author 2* asked for other types of data. All the participants shared their learning reports (compulsory homework required by the NAEA) with *Author 2*.

The participants were all male HEI leaders (see Table 2). Three of them served as vice presidents, and one as vice chairman. The reason of chosen these participants

Table 2 Profile of the participants, data and coding (U.S. programmes)

No.	Role	Main responsibilities	Programme theme	Programme time	Interview	Learning report	Coding
1	Vice president	Logistics	Human resources and faculty development	2013	Yes	Yes	VP-4
2	Vice chairman	Students’ affairs		2016	Yes	Yes	VC-1
3	Vice president	Logistics	Governance structure and university development	2017	Yes	Yes	VP-5
4	Vice president	Infrastructure and further education		2017	Yes	Yes	VP-6

Note: The role refers to the role held at the time of interviewing

is: They represent four similar regional HEIs in western China, all of which are administered by Chinese provincial governments. Three of them are normal HEIs and one is technological HEI.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were initially created in Chinese and then translated into English. Protocols were created to match the themes of the programme. The authors described the phenomena and derived codes from the data. To avoid predetermined categories or theoretical views, relevant literature or theories are integrated into the discussion. The study applied conventional qualitative content analysis. The authors developed coding for categories based on the interview descriptions and the interpretation of the interview transcriptions and learning reports.

4 Findings

This section presents the findings relating to the Chinese HEI leaders' perceptions of tenure in American HEIs, and also the perceived shortcomings of tenure when they considered the application of tenure in China. It is important to highlight that the leaders interviewed came from non-elite Chinese HEIs, so the findings reflect the elite American HEIs that they visited, as opposed to the non-elite Chinese HEIs that they represented.

4.1 Third-Party Reviews and Professionalism

The Chinese HEI leaders gained a preliminary understanding of the tenure system in American HEIs during their visits and were high in their praise for its efficiency. In their view, tenure is a symbol of top HEIs, worldwide.

After graduating and being recruited by a university, there will be six years of trial. During trial, if you cannot get the title of associate professor, or professor in some university, you have to leave. (VP-5, interview)

(UC) Berkeley is a top university worldwide, which must maintain a high level of research. Berkeley needs outstanding talents and produces policy (tenure) to encourage outstanding talents to meet its criteria. Faculty are of a high level in general, mostly with doctoral degrees. (VP-6, interview)

Third-party reviews in the tenure system won great praise from the Chinese HEI leaders. They considered them to be impartial. The third-party reviews in tenure ensure the excellence of the HEIs. The leaders spoke much about the details of the

third-party reviews, such as the anonymous evaluations, international experts, and the standards for selection. However, their knowledge of tenure may not be entirely accurate. In the following excerpt, VP-5 talks about course selection and graduate students as being criteria for tenure. But in fact, very few PhD programmes (the top level the leaders refer to) see teaching as an important factor in a tenure review (Rothgeb & Burger, 2009).

For training and introduction of academics, they (American HEIs) apply strict competition: tenure system. ...The evaluation is not based on the HEI itself but on international peers. The HEI sends the application to international peers for reviewing. The review is selective and stressful. Once tenured, the faculty cherish their honour and thus will not procrastinate. The evaluation is comprehensive, including the course selection, the influence of research, the collaboration with other scholars, the training of graduate students. All these tie you to the 'chariot' so that you cannot stay without working. (VP-5, interview)

In faculty employment and promotion, they (American HEIs) do a great job. The most famous is the third-party review. Your (the interviewer's) HEI evaluates faculty by itself, right? American HEIs, after selecting basic material, send material to world-wide experts... The experts anonymously review the candidates: How does the candidate rank among the discipline worldwide? Based on his background, how is his potential in future research? In fact, third-party review avoids human sophistication.... This impressed me most. Third-party review is an objective and real selection of talents. (VP-6, interview)

The leaders also praised the professionalism of the American HEI faculty highly. During the interview, they talked about professional behaviour in the teaching and service of American faculties. The following quotation illustrates the contrast between Chinese and American faculties. The professionalism of the American faculty won their very sincere approval.

What touched me most is the professionalism of the faculty and staff. We Chinese talk about dedication, which is a very obscure concept. The Americans discuss professionalism, which refers to the spirit of the contract that they signed with the university. 'This is my position, and needless to say, I will do my best'.... We Chinese do scientific administration. We create rules to restrict people. The Americans exercise values administration. Scientific administration, such as attendance checking, is just a prop. They have a spirit of self-realization: The individual loves his job and does it well. That is self-realization. This really impressed me! We can hardly reach their standard of professionalism. For example, an instructor needs to reply to students' online questions within 24 hours, no matter how many students there are. If one does not, that will be a pedagogical catastrophe. To teach a class, an instructor needs to prepare a lecture handout. There's no ready-made handout. The instructor needs to prepare it in advance, even the small tips, and then submit it online. The content for the next class is then very clear. I think this professionalism extends to faculty promotion—the title review. (VP-6, interview)

Participating in university planning, teacher selection, job title promotion and other processes, makes up for any lack of knowledge by the administrative staff relating to the academic field. It cultivates the teachers' sense of ownership, improves their enthusiasm, initiative and creativity, promotes academic freedom and academic autonomy, and balances the administrative power against the academic power. (VC-1, learning report)

4.2 *'Moving Up or Out' Rather Than Academic Freedom*

The original purpose of tenure was to guarantee academic freedom. But the Chinese HEI leaders in our study rarely understood tenure in this way. In their discussion, they seldom interpreted tenure as a 'life-long position' (终身教职), but rather as 'moving up or out' (非升即走). In the leaders' understanding, the benefit of tenure was to stimulate new faculty members to advance research productivity and to clear out those who did not match the high criteria set for research.

A PhD. staff member who cannot fulfil the criteria (of publication) within five years will have to leave Berkeley for a lower level HEI. He/she cannot stay in Berkeley, because Berkeley is a top HEI worldwide and must maintain a high level of research. (VP-4, interview)

We have much to learn from their (American) faculty administration and evaluation. They do a great job in the faculty promotion tunnel. If you cannot gain tenure within six years, which equals the Chinese 'public officials,' you have to leave. The evaluation includes both teaching and research. (VC-1, interview)

This misunderstanding about tenure does not imply that the leaders do not care about academic freedom. In fact, they think and talk much about academic freedom. The leaders attribute the vitality of the American HEIs to their academic freedom. Most leaders talked about the importance of faculties having autonomy in their academic affairs.

Faculty have a high degree of autonomy in academic research. First, professors have quite a high degree of autonomy in what they study and how to study within their own academic research fields, without external rigid requirements and supervision. Second, the professor independently determines the schedule, content, etc. during teaching, in accordance with the predetermined plan, without external interference. (VP-5, learning report)

We Chinese HEIs also declare academic freedom and a division between academic administration and executive administration. In reality the division is not well implemented. All is up to the president. American HEIs are different. Academic affairs are governed by professors. Professor committees deal with curriculum development, academic papers, and societal services. The review of the professor committee is a sign of the division between academic power and executive power. Chinese HEIs do not yet separate academic and executive affairs. In American HEIs, the power of personnel, finance, and academic affairs is all at the department level, which is an important level. In China, it is all at the HEI level. In America, the department chair is in charge of majors, curricula, student enrolment, and faculty recruitment. The relationship between the department and HEI is like a group company and its subsidiary. That makes things practical. Presidents only operate the macroscopic resources. (VP-6, interview)

The reason for the leaders not connecting tenure to academic freedom may be due to the 'public official' system in China. Prior to 2000, most Chinese HEI faculty members possessed 'public official' status, which was called the 'iron bowl'. Thus, in the view of the HEI leaders who were currently faculty members, as public officials, they had already been 'tenured'. When they looked at the tenure system, they paid more attention to the policy dealing with pre-tenure in the faculty, which is the 'up or out'.

4.3 Omitting the Shortcomings but Conscious of the Practicalities

The Chinese HEI leaders had not noticed the criticisms against tenure. This is easy to understand because few hosts would introduce the shortcomings of their system honestly to their visitors. Nevertheless, VP-5 and VP-6 mentioned the accountability issue relating to the tenured faculty. This reveals that the Chinese HEI leaders mostly gained their knowledge of tenure through the leadership development rather than through academic journal papers. Much of the controversy around tenure was ignored.

Of course, there are some individuals who stop working after being tenured in American HEIs. But that is really few. (VP-5, interview and learning report)

Additionally, VP-5 wrote in his learning report that it was difficult for American HEIs to tackle this problem. But the neglect of the controversy over tenure does not mean that the leaders' thinking around tenure was superficial or over-simplified. In fact, the Chinese HEI leaders were very conscious of the difficulties of implementing tenure in China. They may not know much about the academic discussion around the tenure system, but they did know a great deal about their own HEIs and systems. They pointed very clearly to the setbacks of the 'public official' system. The leaders used the metaphor of an 'iron bowl' versus a 'communal pot' to express their complaints regarding the public official system.

VC-1: Last year we revised faculty evaluation. This has to be consistent with the whole salary system.

Author 2: So the reform is systematic.

VC-1: It is a system which will not function if you forget any part.

...

Author 2: What do you think of tenure? What if it is applied in your university?

VC-1: Here we still need time. Why? Because we still apply the 'public official system' which does not allow us to expel people. It is complicated. Like, Jiao Tong University (an elite university in China) takes a quick cycle. New-coming staff with doctoral degrees, if they cannot meet the criteria within several years, they have to leave. My university still cannot apply this. We can, at most, count the performance and reduce the salary. But I cannot fire people. Impossible.

Author 2: Is it related to the funding sources of American HEIs?

VC-1: Yes, because most (American HEIs) are funded by donation, which requires review. We Chinese HEIs are public institutions which are complex in administration. Private HEIs must be OK. (VC-1, interview)

Here VC-1 explained one reason behind teacher evaluation in American HEIs: financial pressure. This is also reflected in VP-5's learning report:

The total amount of human resources in American HEIs is mainly determined by the HEIs' own financial resources; while the 'public official system' has top-down restrictions on the number of human resources in Chinese HEIs. (VP-5, learning report)

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings express Chinese HEI leaders' praise of tenure. In their view, the tenure system is a sign of efficiency and high-level functioning. The third-party review embedded in the tenure system is seen as objective and impartial. The leaders spoke highly of the professionalism of American faculty members and attributed their professionalism to the tenure system. The academic autonomy at the college level in American HEIs was seen as advanced and ensuring the personnel system, which stimulated the leaders' comparison of the Chinese and American personnel systems (Hui, 2018).

Compared with the academic freedom guaranteed by tenure, the leaders paid far more attention to the pre-tenured faculty situation. They called the tenure system 'up or out', relating to the pre-tenure situation rather than to the 'life-long position' ensured by tenure. This change in emphasis is rooted in the Chinese 'public officials' system', which has troubled HEI leaders for a long time. They saw 'up or out' as a solution for tackling the public officials' system.

Limited by the short time of their visits, the Chinese HEI leaders did not get to know the shortcomings of the tenure system or the controversies existing in American HEIs. Nevertheless, they admitted that it was difficult to tackle accountability issues in a tenured faculty in American HEIs. They also saw financial pressure as being an important reason for teacher evaluation in American HEIs. Further, they developed their in-depth understanding of tenure based on their in-depth knowledge of Chinese HEIs. Admitting the difficulties of applying the tenure system in their own HEIs, the leaders understood that the problems of Chinese HEIs are deeply rooted in a system that would not easily be changed by a single tenure.

These findings drawn from the data demonstrate that the outcomes of the U.S. leadership development programmes are basically successful. The Chinese HEI leaders who participated in the leadership development programmes gained a primary interest in and knowledge of the tenure system in America. They observed the details of the tenure system carefully. Their descriptions of third-party reviews and the American professionalism are vivid and sincere.

Although some misunderstandings about tenure existed, these can easily be corrected by follow-up reading or communication. For example, the leaders did not hear of the controversy around tenure during their visits. But once a leader has become interested in tenure, a quick literature review or report from a consulting group will help him or her understand the shortcomings of the tenure system. Another example was the use of the term 'up or out' instead of tenure. To our understanding, this is not so much the use of a wrong term but an accurate reflection of the problem of 'public officials' in Chinese HEIs. The focus on the productivity of the pre-tenured faculty members rather than on the academic freedom of tenured faculty members reflects the HEI leaders' concern about the lack of vitality in their own faculties.

The most touching point to us was how much the Chinese HEI leaders were concerned for their own HEIs. Although the theme of the interview was 'overseas leadership development', almost all the leaders talked more about their own HEIs

in China, especially in terms of the comparison between the Chinese and American situations. In another words, they compared Chinese non-elite HEIs with American elite HEIs. One reason for such a mis-comparison was the arrangement of the programme: the American HEIs they visited were mostly elite HEIs. Their observations of the American HEIs were detailed, but their memories of their own HEIs were even more comprehensive. The leaders were very conscious of the realities faced by Chinese HEIs. On the one hand, they admired the great achievements of the American HEIs, but on the other, they knew it would be difficult to apply the tenure system in their own HEIs. Furthermore, they knew that tenure would not solve all the problems experienced in Chinese HEIs. The dedication and pragmatic wisdom of the HEI leaders really impressed us.

One significant problem we noticed from the data was that of benchmarking. All the four Chinese HEIs represented were regional or non-elite HEIs with specific aims for their teaching or services. None of them were top-level research or elite HEIs in China. However, the ‘American HEIs’ mentioned in the data were mostly elite or top-class HEIs, such as Berkeley. This was partly due to the programme arrangements. Neither 2013 nor 2016 programme included low-level colleges as programme providers. Only the 2017 programme took baccalaureate/associates college (Skyline College) and community college (San Matteo college) into consideration. But the other reason for mismatching may be the misunderstanding of programme purpose. Leaders talked mostly of elite university such as Berkeley or Stanford even knowing they are inappropriate benchmark for Chinese regional or non-elite HEIs. Of course, there can be different aims for overseas leadership development programmes. To know about top class HEIs worldwide is a good enough purpose for a visit. But looking back to the appeals of leaders for solutions to local problems, we believe a benchmarked visit might be more relevant to their needs. In fact, whether tenure systems are beneficial for a non-elite community college is a pertinent question. Waller and Davis (2006) reported that the presence or non-presence of an institutional tenure system in Texas public two-year colleges does not affect enrolment, growth, affordability indexes, or retention rates. Therefore, this mismatching failed to provide leaders from Chinese non-elite HEIs with a thorough evaluation of the tenure system.

The importing of tenure to China is a specific example that “less prestigious and less resourced colleges follow the lead of more successful and high-status ones” (Harris, 2013). Sometimes in these imitation HEIs move away from their original mission toward norms of achievement and competence (Harris, 2013). But mass education is as important as elite education and it deserves a particular model. The American HE system is famous for its diversity in types of institution. What makes America special is not one or two top research HEIs but the cooperation of various institutions, which include private HEIs, public HEIs, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and more. Institutional diversity “allows the system to meet the needs of a broad base of students and to achieve many of the ideals espoused and valued about higher education” (Harris, 2013). Although there certainly are differences between Chinese and American HEIs, it would not be hard to find regional HEIs in America with similar missions to the HEIs of the Chinese participants. A deliberate choice of

similarly benchmarked institutions may improve the quality of overseas leadership development programmes and provide a solid foundation for future communication and cooperation.

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