Reforming Civil Service When Employees are Unhappy
A Longitudinal Study of Job Satisfaction of Environmental Enforcement Officials in Guangzhou, China
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Abstract
Over the past two decades, Chinese leaders have sought to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector organizations by professionalizing the civil service. These efforts, however, have been hampered by several emergent factors—large-scale crackdown on corruption, lagging public sector compensation scales, and increasing job demand on government agencies—that may have undermined the morale and job satisfaction of government employees. For example, as reported in the media, there have been an unprecedentedly high turnover rates in government bureaucracies, particularly those in top-tier cities. In the past, massive numbers of college graduates signed up for civil service exams, but the numbers have waned considerably in recent years. Has job satisfaction really declined among public employees in China? Have there been changes in the antecedents of job satisfaction over time? These are important questions for civil service reform in China. Based on data gathered from two rounds of questionnaire surveys of enforcement team officials of the Guangzhou Environmental Protection Bureau (GEPB) in the years 2000 and 2014 respectively, this paper provides the first quantitative evidence for answering the questions.
Specifically, utilizing a multivariate OLS regression with interaction terms, our study shows that a) compared to the year 2000, GEPB officials’ overall job satisfaction in 2014 has declined; b) mission match was positively correlated with job satisfaction in both surveys; but this correlation was significantly stronger in 2014 than in 2000; c) officials’ pay satisfaction, as measured by their average rating for extrinsic rewards, has plummeted from 2000 to 2014; and d) only in 2014 was management support positively correlated with job satisfaction.
This paper contributes to the public management literature in several ways. First, it provides the first empirical evidence showing the positive correlation between mission match and job satisfaction and its variations across different points in time. Second, it provides quantitative evidence affirming the media portrayal of an increasingly unhappy Chinese government workforce. Third, by introducing a time dimension, this paper resembles a quasi-experimental study that traces possible causes of changes in job satisfaction among government officials in China. Fourth, the empirical results help inform possible strategies for increasing morale and job satisfaction of public employees in the emergent contexts of China.

Mr Bo Wen is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Public Policy and Management at the University of Southern California (USC). Prior to attending USC, Bo studied at Shenzhen University where he obtained a bachelor’s degree in Journalism, and at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) where he earned his master’s degree in Public Policy.
Collaborating assiduously with Professors Shui-Yan Tang, Terry Cooper, and William Resh, Bo Wen approaches his research from three distinctively different analytical perspectives. Specifically, on the inter-organizational (governmental) level, Bo’s research concerns the discourse of institutional analysis in the Chinese bureaucratic setting. On the organizational level, Bo’s academic interest converges on issues of citizen participation in government. Finally, on the individual level, Bo focuses essentially on the nature and impact of Public Service Motivation (PSM) – an academically popular concept used to represent the motivations of individuals to serve in public organizations.

All interested are welcome.