

06. Human Resource Management Stream

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HR Professionalism in Foreign-invested Enterprises in China

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HR Professionalism in Foreign-invested Enterprises in China***ABSTRACT***

The purpose of this study is to analyse the degree of professionalism of HR professionals in foreign-invested enterprises in China. Our findings reveal that HRM in China is still at the initial stage of professionalism. There are many conditions of professionalism that are not yet attained including the fact that many HR professionals are not HR-qualified. Many also appear to possess low level of common body of knowledge about HR-related issues. The strategic role of HR is also not being practiced frequently in the HR field in China. The study highlights the need to improve the professional education system and certification system as well as the establishment of an ethical record in HR implementation and practice in the country.

Keywords: Human Resources, professionalism, foreign-invested enterprises, China

INTRODUCTION

The Human Resources (HR) profession has evolved during the past 25 years and continues to evolve in addressing organisational needs and business performance. Although many researchers have argued that HRM is truly considered as a profession due to its role in achieving business outcomes (Ulrich et al., 2013), others are uncertain how HR functions are really engaged in strategic roles. Caldwell (2003), for instance, noted that HR professionals' roles and functions are often ambiguous in many companies, thus there is still an underlying question on the meaning and extent of professionalism in the HR field. There are many arguments supporting Caldwell's (2003), including the fact that HR practitioners are often viewed as powerless in the decision-making process and are seldom involved at the strategic level of management. There have also been several studies outlining the fact that the contribution of the HR department to business outcomes is indirect and therefore, difficult to be observed (e.g., Mundy, 2012).

The contrasting views are exacerbated in the case of Human Resource Management (HRM) in China. With an exponential increase in the number of foreign-invested enterprises (FIEs), HRM was eventually recognised by the Chinese government as a professional occupation in 2003. We often assume that the degree of HR professionalism in China is not as sophisticated in comparison to the well-developed HR policies and practices in many Western countries. However, very limited prior empirical research studies have actually been conducted to examine the issue of HR professionalism in China and

thus, we are still uncertain as to how HR as a profession has progressed in the country. Examining and understanding the status of HR professionalism not only influences the development of this profession in China, but also affects the performance of the companies operating in the country.

Our focus is to analyse the degree of professionalism of HR professionals in FIEs in China, specifically focusing on a well-developed international cooperative project in the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP). The SIP was established in 1994 as an international cooperation between Suzhou and Singapore and has attracted major investments from 88 Fortune 500 companies, with big names such as L'Oreal, Samsung, and Bosch. HR managers employed by these FIEs have the responsibilities to ensure that their HR management policies and implementation not only meet local standards but also international standards in line with the background of their enterprises. The study addresses the following question: *To what extent does HR professionalism exist in foreign invested enterprises (FIEs) in China?* We address this question through conducting preliminary analyses of responses from a number of employees working in FIEs in China.

Our study contributes in several ways. First, it highlights the degree of HR professionalism in FIEs in China. Existing studies on HR professionalism tend to focus on examining HR professionalism in Western countries while studies in developing countries are not as extensive. In particular, HR professionalism in FIEs in China has not been investigated empirically. Several publications on the topic are all written in Chinese and some are published as newspaper articles or in a casual form of print. Thus, despite some recent attempts to highlight HR professionalism in China, the majority of the studies are not empirical. Second, extant literature has traditionally focused on using trait theory such as the extent of business knowledge in defining professionalism. However, being considered a professional not only requires the acquisition and demonstration of high level of knowledge but also exemplary professional ethical behaviour. Thus, we incorporate several variables to define HR professionalism which will be illustrated in the following section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

'Profession' is a much controversial concept in sociological research (Evetts, 2009; Sciulli, 2005), with much confusion and debate about how to conceptualise this term (Svensson and Evetts, 2003). In the 1950s to 1960s, researchers were focused on differentiating 'profession' from other occupations (Evetts, 2013), including outlining the characteristics of professions to include the general systemic knowledge of the professionals, the authority over clients, their altruism, autonomy and self-regulation, as well as the distinctive occupational culture, community and legal regulation pertaining to the profession. However, it now seems difficult to draw a hard definitional line between professions and other experts (Svensson and Evetts, 2003). Defining the term 'profession' is regarded as a useless diversion that contributes nothing to the understanding of power exerted by particular occupations (Champy, 2009). Thus, many researchers prefer to handle the definitional issue by offering a list of occupational groups rather than defining what profession really is (e.g. Abbott, 1988; Hanlon, 1998).

Whilst it is often accepted that a profession demands certain professionalism, we are still unclear on what we understand by the term 'professionalism' particularly in the context of HR. Professionalism has been defined differently: as a process (Freidson, 1986, 2001), a function (Hoyle and John, 1995), an activist (Sachs, 2003) and an occupation (Evetts, 2009). These different interpretations in general could be grouped into two sections, either as normative value system or controlling ideology. As a value system, professionalism is optimistic about the contribution of the professions to the society (Evetts, 2003, 2006). According to Freidson (2001), professionals should be worthy of trust, put the clients first and not use their professional knowledge for wrongful purposes. In return they will be rewarded with social status, authority and may also command a positive economic return. As a controlling ideology, professionalism has been described rather pessimistically - professionalism is a form of market closure and occupational dominance which effectively control the actions of workers (Larson, 1977; Larkin, 1983). Due to its negative interpretations, professionalism as a controlling ideology is less adopted in

comparison to the normative discourse of professionalism in terms of issues such as client relationship, occupational identities and work practices (Evetts, 2003).

The traits of the profession have been considered by many researchers to define professionalism. However, this is not as simple and straightforward with many different trait characteristics defining the profession. Table 1 illustrates some distinct traits of a profession outlined by several researchers. Based on our literature review for the definition of HR professionalism, we consider the trait characteristics of HR practitioners to not only solely be based on their extent of normative HR and business knowledge and value system, but to also encompass their professional behavior which include their self-assessment of ethical behaviour. In this study, we thus consider HR professionalism to be based on: the existence of common HR body of knowledge, professional education and continuous training, HR strategic role, HR professional associations and professional ethical behaviour in accordance to the code of ethics.

Insert Table 1 about here

Common body of knowledge

Freidson (2001) defines the profession as comprising of professionals with specialised knowledge-making system, enabling them to have decision-making power and dominance in the division of labour (Muzio et al., 2013; Freidson, 1986). Professional knowledge must also be more than just being mechanical knowledge; it needs to be discretionary knowledge. Professional (discretionary) knowledge is explicit and communicable as compared to personal (mechanical) knowledge (Eraut, 2000). The former has 'foundational status'; it can be communicated amongst professionals in the industry and can be taught to potential members entering the profession. New entrants to the profession must be trained to understand such discretionary knowledge and the application of it in different situations (Eraut, 2000). This is a common body of knowledge that all professionals within that profession must understand and abide by it.

Professional education and continuous training

Professional education and continuous training programs are the fundamental building block in developing specialised knowledge system for the profession. For the HR profession, the training programs have evolved from ones that were mainly focused on Industrial Relations and personal functional skills, to now include very intangible aspects such as leadership, strategic HRM and International Human Resource Management. HR professionals must be well-versed in various topics in the HR field, including (1) Business, Leadership, Management skills; (2) Personal Effectiveness and Behavioural Skills; (3) Human Resource Planning; (4) Learning and Development; (5) Employment Law and Employee Relations; (6) Performance and Reward; (7) Organisational Development and Design (CIPD, 2014). Professional education and continuous training in those topics thus play important roles in building and maintaining professional knowledge (Lester et al., 2011).

The strategic role of HR

Due to the rapidly changing global business environment, intense competition and workforce diversity, HR professionals must play a strategic role in the organisation's strategic decision-making process in order to develop and align human resource strategies to the organisational aims and objectives (Mao and Tu, 2009). Ulrich et al. (2013) argues that HR professionals not only need to develop their competencies in capability building, technology development, HR innovator and integrator, and be a change champion, but they also need to develop their competency as a strategic positioner. To play a strategic role, HR professionals should bridge the organisation's external and internal links. They need to realise how the external factors could influence their internal organisation, and vice versa. They also need master the language of business, their organisation strategy, the customer segments and the general business conditions (Ulrich et al., 2013).

HR professional associations

Professional associations have a significant role in developing, promoting and strengthening a profession (Palea, 2012). They are considered as the organisations that create and symbolise professional practices and behaviour (Noordegraaf, 2011). There is considerable evidence of the role of professional associations in achieving the legitimacy for HR professionals (Farndale and Brewster, 2005). Amongst the well-established HR professional associations worldwide, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) is the largest professional association in the human resources field. Since its establishment in 1948 in the US, it has promoted the role of HR as a profession, providing HRM education, information services, seminar, consulting, publications, and networking opportunities to its members in approximately 140 countries. As the largest professional association in the field, SHRM has established several subsidiary offices, including in China. Just like any other professional associations, SHRM also plays an important role in supporting professional education, continuous training and promoting the progress of HR professionalism.

Ethical behaviour and code of ethics

Professionalism influences the professionals' ethical behaviour, and in return the code of ethics of the profession also influences the degree of professionalism (SHRM, 2007). Professional code of ethics helps a professional to decide the right course of action when faced with an ethical dilemma at work. The code of ethics includes for example, the provision of accurate and fair information for everyone, the assurance of confidentiality, the promotion of equality, and the provision of equal opportunity for all. The code of ethics thus essentially regulates and governs professional standards and conduct, and consequently determines the degree of professionalism.

HR PROFESSIONALISM IN CHINA

Although there are several studies that have highlighted the degree of professionalism of HR professionals in China, the majority of these are not empirical. Prior theoretical studies however have

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provided a good starting point in highlighting the current situation and issues of HRM and the HR profession in China. The first problem is concerned with the HR professional education and certification system in China (Zhao, 2012). The HR professional education in China is simply a copy of the western system. Many educational institutions merely use the same textbooks and impart the same teaching and curriculum system. Although this could be regarded as an efficient way of establishing a new subject like HRM in the Chinese education system, the downside to such cut-and-paste system is that the knowledge and skills taught to the students (i.e., the HR professionals) may not be related to the local/domestic HRM issues. An associated issue is the high passing rate of the HR professional certification system in China. The Chinese government has established the national HR professional qualification certificate in 2002 and many other similar certificates are introduced by the government continually. However, this does not in anyway indicate that the Chinese HR professional certification system is perfect and effective. Taking the national HR qualification certificate as an example, the pass rate of the test was about 50% in 2005. In comparison to the passing rate of 11.22% in the National Judicial Exam and 10% passing rate in the Certificate Public Account, the pass rate of the national HR qualification is deemed as relatively too high.

The second problem to the HR profession in China is the low entry barriers of professionals into the HR industry. Compared to other professions, such as doctors and lawyers, the HR industry in China has not formed a career barrier yet (Shi, 2009). The third problem associated with the HR profession in China is the perceived low professional quality of HR practitioners in the country. In China, the development of the HRM industry is mainly driven by the government, and private professional certifications are absent which may not effectively assist in the development of HR professionalism there.

With very limited empirical studies examining HR professionalism in China, we are motivated to analyse the degree of HR professionalism in foreign-invested companies in China. We analyse the degree of professionalism based on the existence of common body of knowledge, professional education and continuous training, the strategic role of HR, the integration of professional associations in the field, and the importance of professional ethical behaviour according to the code of ethics in the industry.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a quantitative methodology using survey method. The questionnaire items are mainly based on the items used in Ulrich et al.'s (2013) research, but also included some items from Dowling & Fisher (1997). The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section 1 consisted of questions about the demographic profile of the respondents, their professional education background, certification and years in the HR industry. Section 2 included questions about the organisational context: the nature of the organisation, the number of employees and the ownership of the firms. Section 3 contained questions about the position and responsibilities of the respondents: their job title, position in the formal hierarchy, primary role, and continuous training.

We used convenience sampling in obtaining our sample through contacting the Suzhou Industrial Park Human Resource Department (SIPHRD). This is a professional association with a large number of members within the SIP, involving 147 HR professional members working in foreign-invested enterprises and 128 members who work in local companies. Since we are targeting only the FIEs, we excluded the 128 professional members and only sent out our questionnaires to 147 HR professional members working in the FIEs. Within our target deadline of 2 weeks, we received 72 responses, giving a return rate of 49%. We did not conduct a follow-up to get more responses, due to 2 main reasons: (1) we considered the return rate of 49% within 2 weeks as favourable, and (2) we did not want to give an unfavourable impression of SIPHRD by contacting and repeatedly reminding the members to complete our questionnaire. With some missing data, only 65 completed questionnaires are deemed as useful.

We conducted preliminary descriptive statistics analyses of our data using SPSS. In terms of the organisational profile of our respondents, the majority of the respondents were from the telecommunication industry (32%) and the precision machinery production industry (26%). 16% of the respondents were working in the manufacturing sectors, followed by those working in the medical

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supplies sector (14%) and in the utility sector (5%). Other respondents were from companies in the business and financial service, education, and the retail industry.

The majority of the HR professionals who responded to our questionnaire were female (74%) while the males only accounted for 26% of the total sample. 21% of the respondents aged between 20 and 30, and 61% were younger than 40 years. Only 5% of participants were older than 50 years. Among these HR professionals, 47% of them have been working in the HR field for more than 10 years and over 70% of them have more than 5 years of experience.

In terms of having the common body of knowledge, our findings highlight interesting insights. Only 25% of the respondents studied HRM as their major; they understood that their career would revolve in the HR field and they recognised the importance of HRM. 75% of the respondents actually studied majors other than HRM, with 14% of them having studied law and 12% having studied psychology. Some other respondents reported that they only had the office management major (9%), marketing major (9%) and public administration major (6%) respectively. The rest of the respondents had other majors such as English, finance, accounting and information technology. This indicates that the majority of professionals working in the HR field in the FIEs in China do not actually possess the common body of knowledge required to be in the HR field. We also asked the respondents about the types of HR professional magazines they often read. This question is to give us an indication of further assessing the participants' professional knowledge. The answers were very variable and no similarity can be found amongst these answers. 15% of the respondents did not mention any magazines and 31% of the respondents honestly reported that they never read any professional magazines. This is concerning given the fact that many of these professionals were not actually trained to understand discretionary knowledge associated with HRM and the application of HR policies and practices in different situations. Not many were also aware of the HR progress and development as very few of them did not keep themselves updated by reading HR professional magazines.

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In terms of professional education and continuous training, the respondents to our questionnaire reported that they had high level of formal qualifications, with 18% of the respondents had a master's degree, 62% had a bachelor degree and only 20% had a college degree. These responses actually illustrate the high expectations of many FIEs on the professional education of their HR professionals. In terms of continuous training, our questionnaire allowed the respondents to tick as many training courses as applicable to them. 62 out of 65 of our respondents (95%) have upgraded themselves by attending the functional skills training provided by their companies. 34 out of 65 of them (52%) have attended business/leadership/management skills training. 24 of them (37%) regularly attended trainings related to the law and employment relationship. The last three categories in our questionnaire are conferences (attended by 15% of our respondents), organisational development and strategic HRM courses (attended by 10% of our respondents) and personnel skills (attended by 8% of the respondents). However, when we asked them about the frequency of training, 43% of them commented that they had only attended 2 (or less than 2 times of) training. The percentages of respondents who have attended 3-5 times and more than 10 times of training were almost the same, which are 24% and 22% respectively. In total, 67% of the respondents commented that they have been trained less than 5 times in the last year.

In terms of the roles the HR professionals play in their organisations, we asked the respondents to consider whether their roles are functional, strategic or only being involved in organisational development activities. The functional HR activities include designing benefits, medical, safety, compensation, recruiting, labour relation, training and communication. The strategic activity of HR included planning, HR strategy and formulation and being involved in affirmative action. The organisational development activities are concerned with issues in relation to organisational change, research and HR effectiveness. The majority of the respondents (72%) indicated that their roles were merely functional, while 16% responded that they were primarily involved in organisational development role. There were only 12% of the respondents who indicated that they played a strategic role in their HR profession in the organisation.

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In terms of professional associations, interestingly, once again many respondents were not qualified as they did not possess any professional certifications. Only 35% of the respondents indicated that they had HR occupational qualification certificate awarded by the government. Finally, in terms of the code of ethics in the industry, we had asked the respondents to give a score on the importance of professional ethical behaviours. The most important ethical behaviour listed by the respondents is that of 'adopting responsible behaviour' with a mean value of 3.83, followed by 'building a professional reputation' (mean of 3.80), and followed closely by 'promoting justice and fairness' (mean of 3.78). The least important ethical behaviour as perceived by the respondents is 'rendering service in accordance with standards' (mean of 3.65) and followed by 'avoiding conflict of interest' (mean of 3.67).

DISCUSSION

This study is designed to provide a preliminary assessment of the degree of HR professionalism in foreign-invested enterprises in China. In assessing the extent of HR professionalism, five aspects are considered in the study: the existence of common body of knowledge, professional education and continuous training, the strategic role of HR, the integration of professional associations in the field, and the importance of professional ethical behaviour in accordance to the code of ethics in the industry.

Although about 80 percent of the participants in our study have a bachelor or master degree, the majority of them have not been trained to possess the common body of knowledge associated with HRM. The high level of education of our respondents could be explained by 2 possible explanations. University education is increasingly viewed as an important aspect of improving one's life in the Chinese mentality. The prevalence of university education in China has increased the number of university graduates in the labour market, providing an opportunity for companies to recruit these highly qualified people. At the same time, highly qualified professionals tend to prefer working for FIEs, as they offer a comparatively higher salary than the domestic companies. Despite the high level of education, HR professionals in China are simply not trained in HRM. Their HRM knowledge is limited with many of them working in

the HR field based on the relative working experience and not their educational majors. Many of these respondents actually noted that they had obtained their HR professional knowledge with practical experience. The HR professionals further noted that even though they have attended functional and management skills, only a few of them have been trained with HR knowledge on some relatively new topics. It appears therefore that the professional education and continuous training of HR professionals in China are not sufficient to enable these professionals to gain an improvement in their professional knowledge. Training therefore has not essentially kept up with the latest HRM trend and issues.

This is in line with the views of the respondents on the strategic role of HR for business. Many HR professionals in China did not indicate the strategic role of HR professionals, which essentially affect the degree of HR professionalism in China in a less positive way. Moreover, with only a small proportion of the respondents holding a professional certificate, it appears that professional certificate is not important in the recruitment process of HR professionals. Unlike in many other Western countries where professional associations are viewed highly, the present condition of Chinese HR certification has little contribution to maintaining and even improving the extent of professionalism of HR professionals in the country. Finally, with prior studies having noted the importance of ethical conduct in the HR professionalism (e.g., Losey et al., 2005), our study indicates that HR professionals in China are aware of the importance of professional ethical behaviour in their work. However, we are unable to assess the actual ethical behaviour in real situations. This poses a limitation in our sample in that we relied on subjective reviews from respondents on their self-perceived views of the importance of professional ethical behaviour. Another limitation in our study is the small sample size that is confined to the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) region and may not reflect the views of HR professionals in FIEs throughout China.

Based on our findings, professionalism in the HR field in China requires improvements in a number of ways. First, the education system in China must be more comprehensive to include both the systemic study of the relevant subject and intensive continuous training. It appears that at present stage, Western textbooks and HR practices are copied without even thinking of the relevance and application of

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those practices in the Chinese context. The second recommendation concerns the need to develop private professional associations. Although the Chinese government plays a dominant role in the professional certification system, it appears that there are several issues with the current system with the high passing rate and the perceived common view that HR certification is actually not that valuable to enter the HR field in China. Developing private professional associations may encourage the private sector to play a more active role in ensuring the standard and quality of HR certification system in the country. It takes time and resources to ensure the development of HR professionalism in China and it requires the effective working relationships between the government and the private sector. The third recommendation concerns the establishment of an ethical record in HR implementation and practice. The current system is lax and there is an absence of a comprehensive system to identify professional misdemeanor and ethical misconduct in the HR field.

In conclusion, the study highlights the degree of HR professionalism in FIEs in China. At present, there is low level of common body of knowledge in HR and low level of continuous training. Although there is high level of educational background of HR professionals in China, they are not admitted to the HR field based on HR certifications nor their HR professional knowledge. Their HR roles in organisations are also mainly in the functional and organisational development activities, with strategic role of HR being less practiced in many FIEs. Finally, professional ethical behaviours in accordance to the code of ethics are viewed as important by HR professionals in China, although we do not have full comprehension of how the standards and code of ethics are practiced in the real field. We can safely conclude that based on our arguments and findings, HR professionalism in foreign-invested enterprises in China is still developing and at present, is at the initial stage of professionalism.

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Table 1: Traits of the Profession

Researcher	Characteristics (Traits)
Freidson (1973)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Common body of knowledge ● Exclusive jurisdiction ● Labour market status ● Formal education and training ● Commitment to doing well
Freidson (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Specialised knowledge ● Professional autonomy and internal control ● Required training for new entries ● Ideology of service ● Recognition as a profession and ● An ideology of service
Farndale and Brewster (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Common entry and performance standards ● Specialised knowledge ● Strong sense of identity ● Ethical code of conduct ● Required training and certifications
Williams, Onsman and Brown (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Full-time occupations ● Training schools ● Professional bodies ● A code of ethics.
Abdulla and Threadgold (2010) Wilensky (1964)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Full-time occupation and occupational territory ● Training schools and linking these with universities ● National and international occupational parties ● Professional licenses and accreditation ● A code of ethics
Fanning (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A governing body ● Education, Training and Certification ● Common body of knowledge ● Code of ethics and discipline ● Legal status ● A research base ● Independence ● Contribution to society and ● Recognition