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Government Selection in China: Past, Present and Future

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History of Chinese Civil Service Selection



Selection in the public sector has its deep root in ancient China.

While the origin of the system can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220), the first imperial civil service examination began in 605 AD in Sui Dynasty, developing and maturing in the Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty, and continuing to the Qing Dynasty, and lasting continuously until its abolishment in 1905.

At the peak of the system, 80% of the prime ministers in Tang Dynasty were from *Jinshi* (a successful candidate in the highest imperial examinations).

The examination system was an attempt to select government officials on the basis of merit rather than because of social position or



The imperial examination site



The examination rooms

History of Chinese Civil Service Selection (con't)

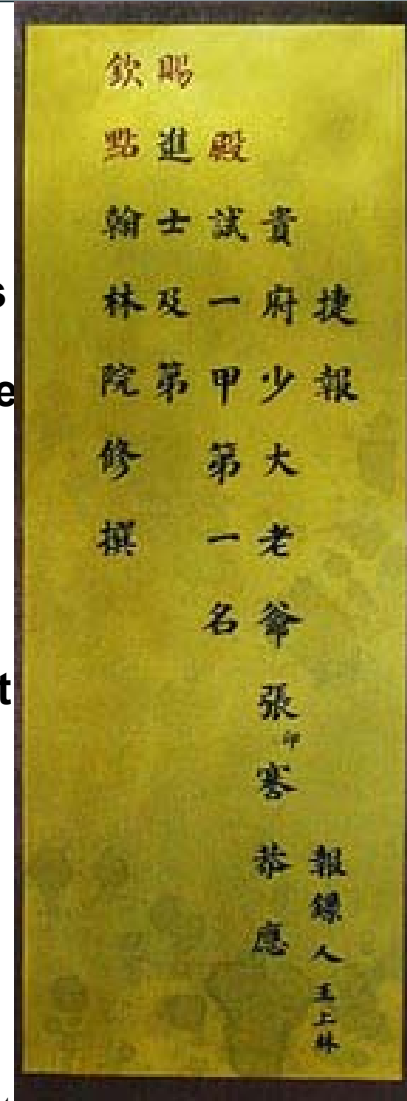


Imperial examinations consisted of county-, province- and state-level exams, which were held every three years nationwide.

The exams were based on Confucian books, sources of ruling ideology, and had many sections including interviews, writing from memory, answering questions, composition writing, and ode writing. Other subjects, such as history, law, calligraphy, and math, were used as a gauge to test professional knowledge.

The final round of state-level examinations was overseen by the emperor in person. The winners at a palace exam were determined according to their scores and classified into three levels.

The top three candidates in the first level were respectively known as Zhuangyuan (champion scholar), Bangyan (runner-up) and Tanhua (third place).



A proclamation issued by Qing Dynasty Emperor Guangxu declares that Zhang Qian won zhuangyuan (champion scholar), a title conferred on the one who came first in the highest imperial examination, in 1894.

Current Practices of Civil Service Selection



- **Modern civil service examination system has been started in 1994 by the Chinese Government to attract more and more talent into the public service sector. Now it becomes the #1 test in China in term of its scale and impact.**
- **Just before Chinese New Year Xinhua reported that 640, 000 people sat for China's 2008 civil service examination. Of these, only one in sixty become government employees at the entry level.**
- **The soaring popularity of the civil service exam is somewhat an extension of the college entrance examination system reinstated in the latter part of 1977 when Deng Xiaoping took the helm at the end of the "cultural revolution".**
- **Records show that 5 million exam-takers ranging in age from more than 40 to 13 sat the examination in 1977, and more than 270,000 were successfully enrolled. That created the foundation for the current national college enrollment system.**
- **This year, more than 10 million youngsters took the exam, which led to the recruitment of 5.67 million university freshmen.**

Selection of Senior Officials



- **The paper and pencil tests of civil service examination are only for the entry level of government employees.**
- **The contents of the tests cover logical and reasoning, verbal, and knowledge of government regulations and policies and current affairs.**
- **In-basket exercise and leaderless group discussion are sometimes used for government positions beyond the entry level.**
- **The structured interview is a must for senior level of government officials. The dominant method is the situational interview which is a highly structured, standardized process (Hong & Tu, 2006).**
- **Situational judgment tests have been developed since 2003 (Qi & Dai, 2003; Qi, 2005) and adopted by the China Centre for Leadership Assessment (CCLA) under the Central Organization Department in 2006.**
- **360 degree performance appraisal system as well as the balanced score card system are used for assessment of some stated-owned enterprises and local governments (China Australia Governance Program Quarterly Newsletter, 2007).**
- **Personality Inventories are used in some cases.**

Situational Interview with Chinese Style



The format of situational interview developed the China Centre for Leadership Assessment (CCLA) is more like a traditional exam with the following features:

- A scrip with standard situational interview questions
- A display which is used to show the question read by the principle interviewer to the candidate in some cases (e.g., State Asset Supervision and Administration Commission)
- The interview session lasts approximately 40 min per candidate
- Principle interviewers: senior officials 2 levels above the target positions
- Judges: 5-7 experts from universities, and other dept. of government
- The panel of the interviewers and judges fill the rating forms including 6-7 leadership competencies.
- Examples of commonly assessed dimensions:

Organizing & Influencing
Analytical Thinking & Innovation
Flexibility in Decision Making
Learning & Adaptability
Interpersonal Sensitivity (org. savvy)
Motivating Others
Communication



Government Official SJT



The method of situational judgment test was introduced to China in 2003 by a group of Psychometricians from Jiangxi Normal University (Qi & Dai, 2003).

Under the sponsorship of the China Centre for Leadership Assessment (CCLA) at the Central Organization Department, Prof. Qi and his team had spent 3 years from 2003 – 2006 to develop the Government Official Situational Judgment Test (GOSJT) with an approach of Computer Adaptive Test (CAT).

It has been pilot tested since 2005 and administered repeatedly in various central government agencies and local governments across China without compromising the test security due to the nature of CAT.

The Key Features of GOSJT (Qi, 2005):

- **Based on a large bank of the test items developed from government official's job analysis**
- **Guided by IRT technique**
- **Test items are delivered in a computer-adaptive format**

Selection of Top Government Officials



Chinese leaders except at village level are all appointed by the China Communist Party (CCP). It is often operated in so-called "behind-close-doors" selection process.

The above traditional process is widely blamed as hotbeds for corruption, nepotism, and the selection of incompetent leaders.

By 2001-2, there was some form of competitive ballot in almost 2,000 township elections, five percent of the national total (Thornton, 2008). Townships are at the lowest administrative rung in the Chinese government structure.

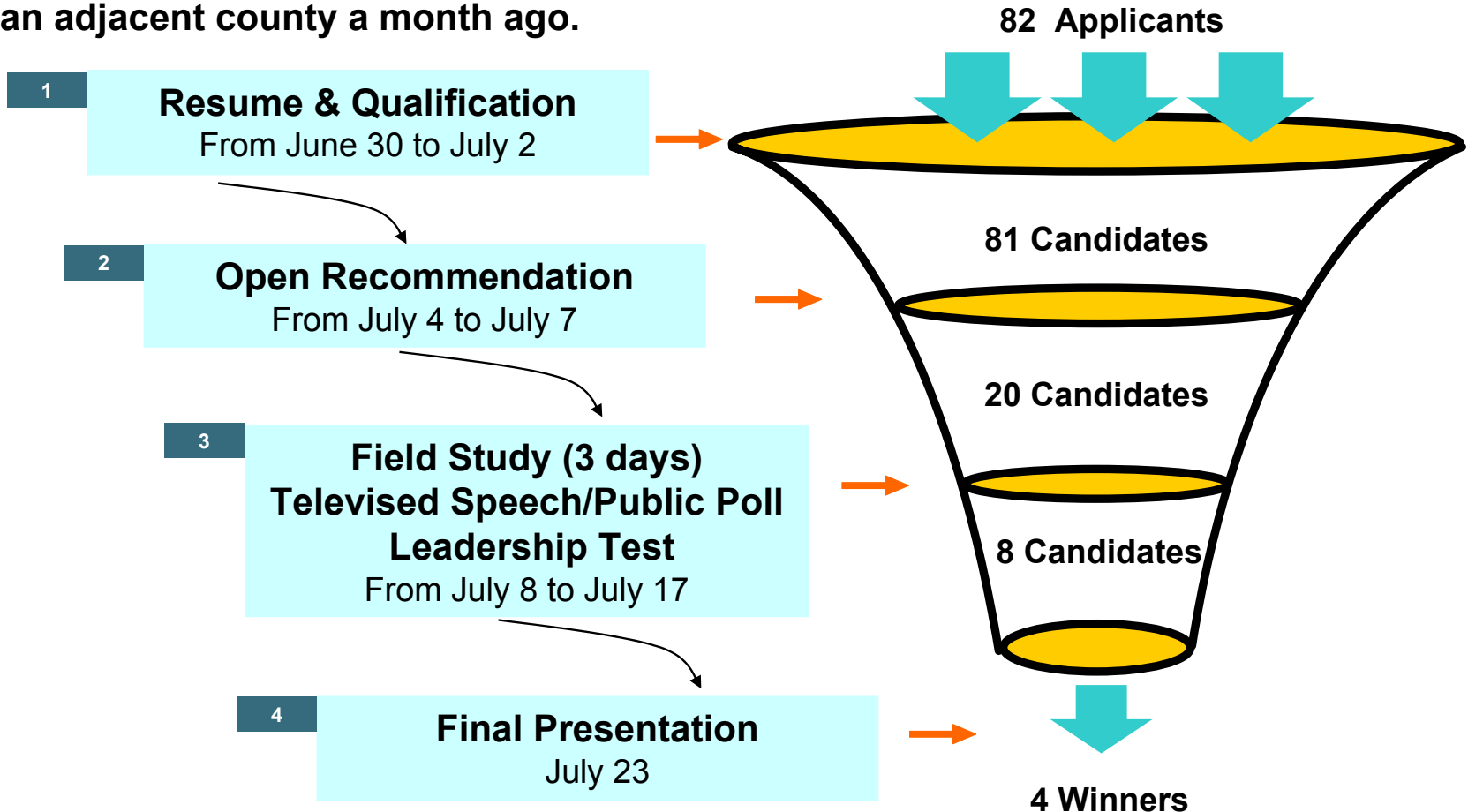
More recently, a new process termed "open recommendation and selection" (ORS) has attracted attention when ORS was carried out in selecting leaders at the county, district, and bureau levels in several provinces across China.

Although the Party maintains control of the selection of local leaders, the essence of ORS is that candidates should go through a competitive and transparent selection process. The new tools used in ORS encourage public feedback through telephone hotlines, official websites, and mail in comments (Song, 2008).

ORS in Action: Guiyang Case



Guiyang City, the capital of Guizhou province, has recently selected Party secretaries at the county and district levels through ORS procedures after a mass riot took place in an adjacent county a month ago.



Fairness vs. Validity



Given the glory history of the Imperial Examination System, Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), forerunner of the Chinese democratic revolution, in his Five-Power Constitution, assigned a separate body to supervise the exam process, called the Examination Yuan, along with four other bodies, which were responsible for legislative, executive, judicial and supervisory powers (The Examination Yuan is still in existence in Taiwan now).

The civil servant examination system, though not always yielding a satisfactory result, is widely considered a fair process by Chinese. It helps to curb corruption, as well as promote adequate talent.

The focus is more on fairness, rather than predictive validity.

As a matter of fact, the concept of validity has not been well understood in China, especially in the public sector.

Very few empirical studies have been carried out to collect the validation evidence on various selection tools used in the public sector.

Influence from the Western Practices



Office of Strategic Services (1945) helped select Chinese agents with psychological assessment in Chongqing, China (The Assessment of Men, 1948)

Simulations introduced into China by university professors in mid 1985 and 1990 (Lu, 1986; Liang, Deng, Xu, & Fu, 1992)

The Int'l Labor Org. sent experts to Beijing, China in late 1980s' to train Chinese officials and professionals on assessment methods (Beijing Municipal Organization Dept., 1987)

Major Int'l I/O consulting firms entered China market beginning in late 1990s (e.g., DDI, PDI, SHL, Hay). Majority of the MNCs they served continued to use their assessment services (e.g., Motorola, Alcatel, Coco Cola, Dell)

Structured Interview method originated in the west gained attention in mid 1990s in China

360 feedback was introduced into China in late 1990s (Liang, 2002)

SJT was introduced into China in 2003 (Qi & Dai, 2003)

Challenges & Future Directions



Can the selection of top government officials with the political nature be improved from the I/O technical perspective?

How do we develop right criteria to validate the selection tools when the main concern is fairness?

How do we improve the selection tools without much empirical research on their validation evidence (in a Western way)?

How do we communicate with applicants on the selection process? How do we avoid guanxi and new devils in ORS?

How do we select senior executives of SOEs? Should we follow the government selection approach or the one used in private sector?

How do we incorporate the selection process with the training and development efforts? How can the assessment results be more useful in competency development?

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