

Understanding the Institutional Dynamics of the Chinese Civil Servant Personnel System:

A Policy Design Analysis from the Employee Life Cycle Perspective

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Abstract: Since the inception of the Chinese national civil servant system in 1993, China has undergone significant reforms. However, the rationale behind these modifications has not yet been systematically examined. To address this gap, this study adopts both policy design and employee lifecycle perspectives to develop a 3×3 analytical framework. The framework includes two key dimensions: the policy design content (Actor Structure, Actor Interaction, and Actor Objective) and the policy design process (Entry, Internal Development, and Exit Phases). Our findings highlight a noticeable shift in the actor structure of civil servant management, moving from a centralized model to a more decentralized and contingent model with increased local autonomy. Additionally, the personnel system has evolved from an informal, unstructured approach to a more institutionalized one characterized by standardized procedures and clear criteria, reflecting a growing emphasis on the goals of professionalism, representation, effectiveness, and fairness.

Keywords: Civil Servant Personnel System, Policy Design, Employee Life Cycle, Content Analysis, China

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Introduction

“To achieve governance, the priority is to promote the right officials; to run a government, the most important key is again selecting the right people” (Hu and Lan 2013, 527-528). Worldwide, civil servants encounter numerous dilemmas, challenges, and struggles, including job burnout (Kim 2015; Sciepura and Linos 2022), low levels of work drive (Weißmüller and Zuber 2023), and accountability overload (Shih 2009; Rabbi and Sabharwal 2025), among others. Collectively, these challenges pose threats to organizational performance, public interests, and democratic governance (Kim and Han 2017; Christensen and Lægread 2015; Christensen and Opstrup 2018).

In China, these challenges are compounded by unique domestic factors, including the rapid expansion and complexity of the civil service system, socio-political pressures, and significant regional disparities. For example, civil servants in economically disadvantaged regions often experience greater workload intensity and fewer professional development opportunities, leading to higher burnout rates and lower job satisfaction.

Given these challenges, civil servants’ competencies have become even more critical for effective governance (Yang and Zhao 2024). Skilled bureaucrats are essential not only for managing these issues but also for improving organizational effectiveness, enhancing public service quality, and protecting the public interest (Rasul and Rogger 2018). As the country strives for greater innovation in public administration, the importance of effective civil service management in China cannot be ignored.

In 1993, China instituted its civil servant system with the promulgation of the *Provisional Regulations on State Civil Servants*. The extant literature has shed light on the overarching development trajectories, limitations, prospects, and research priorities of China’s civil servant personnel system (notably Aufrecht and Bun 1995; Burns 1994). For example, Aufrecht and Bun (1995) employed a framework combining three basic competing Chinese values — traditional Chinese culture, socialism, and development — to understand the characteristics of Chinese civil service reform. However, research in governance and policy offers limited insights into the design of China’s civil servant personnel

system. Moreover, the foundational dynamics underpinning the design of this system have received little scholarly attention. To address this lacuna, this study integrates employee lifecycle and policy design theory and investigates the following central questions: *How have the institutions in China's civil servant personnel system evolved from 1993 to 2023, and what is the role of policy design in shaping these changes?*

This study makes two theoretical contributions to literature. First, it enriches our understanding of China's civil servant personnel system. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive investigation of this subject, offering theoretical and empirical insights into the dynamics of the Chinese civil servant system. Second, we developed an analytical model that serves as a heuristic tool for exploring policy design processes within the domains of public policy and governance.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. It begins with a discussion of the analytical framework followed by a detailed presentation of the methodology. Subsequently, the primary findings are elaborated, and the article concludes with an overview of the key conclusions and avenues for future research.

Analytical Framework

Understanding Policy Change from the Policy Design Perspective

Policy change is the process through which the objectives, instruments, and structures of a policy evolve in response to internal dynamics and external factors (Hall 1993; Howlett and Cashore 2009). This encompasses a range of shifts from instrument settings (first-order change) to more substantial transformations in instruments and policy goals (second- or third-order change) (Hall 1993). Theoretical frameworks explaining policy changes often fall into two major perspectives: incrementalist and dynamic. Lindblom's (1959) muddling-through model is a notable example of the former, which emphasizes gradual adjustments constrained by institutional path dependence. Two examples of the latter are the punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) and the multiple stream framework (Kingdon 1984), which highlight moments of abrupt transformation when windows of opportunity arise.

Within policy sciences, the concept of "design" has been associated

with both policy instruments and their implementation, as well as with the influence of policy ideas and advice on policy formulation (Linder and Peters 1990). In this sense, policy design spans policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, and engaging actors, ideas, and interests throughout the policy process (Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl 2009). This involves gathering knowledge about the effects of policy tool use on policy targets and applying that knowledge to the development and implementation of policies intended to achieve defined public policy outcomes and objectives (Bobrow 2006). Unlike broader policy process theories, which often emphasize political struggles and institutional constraints, the core of policy design lies in aligning goals and instruments across and within categories (Howlett 2009). A key implication derived from the policy design perspective is that a well-designed policy is not only internally coherent but also adaptive to changing circumstances, addressing two main issues: the political and the technical dimensions of policymaking and formulation (Howlett and Mukherjee 2014). Analyzing policy changes from a policy design perspective provides a structured approach to understanding how public policies evolve through adjustments to their core components. Rather than viewing policy change merely as a response to exogenous shocks or power shifts, this approach highlights how changes in policy instruments, actor configurations, and governance structures have contributed to policy evolution over time (Capano and Howlett 2021; Haelg, Sewerin, and Schmidt 2020).

In general, the current literature fails to provide an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of policy changes from a policy design perspective. To answer the research question raised in this study, we constructed an analytical framework comprising two dimensions: the content of policy design and process of policy design (Howlett 2014; Howlett and Mukherjee 2014). In the following section, we elaborate on these two dimensions.

The Content of Policy Design

Policy design comprises three critical aspects: the structure of actors, interactions among actors, and the objectives of actions (Schneider and Ingram 1988; Howlett 2014). The actor structure refers

to the stable configurations of social relationships that emerge among interdependent actors, whereas the interactions and exchanges between these actors are invariably oriented toward achieving public policy objectives, values, visions, and evaluations (Haelg et al. 2020). Actor interaction is conceptualized as the process through which actors engage in mutual coordination, communication, and exchange. Together, these three components seamlessly align with the process of designing novel public policies (Neef et al. 2022). In the initial phase of public policy formulation, the primary task is to identify the actors (or stakeholders) involved in policymaking. Because interactions and communications among diverse actors are goal-driven, the outcomes sought through these actor interactions are termed action objectives. The following sections examine these three essential components of policy design in greater detail:

Actor structure:

Actor structure refers to the various types of social relationships established among diverse actors (Klijn, Koppenjan, and Termeer 1995). By crafting an appropriate actor structure in advance, policy design enables the attainment of stable and consistent policy expectations (Peters 2020). Crucially, the actor structure envisioned through the policy design must consider the key characteristics of the actors involved, including their interests, perspectives, positions, needs, and personality traits (Linder and Peters 1991). A comprehensive understanding of these factors is essential to design an actor structure that effectively facilitates interaction and communication, thereby ensuring the achievement of policy objectives (Haelg et al. 2020). Moreover, the actor structure often assumes a network-like configuration, which requires policy designers to anticipate the underlying power dynamics and fundamental patterns. This foresight is necessary to ensure diversity, stability, and balance within the network (Elder-Vass 2008). Simultaneously, designers must ensure that the actor structure has sufficient flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances (Howlett, Capano, and Ramesh 2018). Given the inherent complexity and unpredictability of societal challenges, policy designs must incorporate strategies that enhance actor structure resilience. This resilience allows the structure to effectively accommodate environmental changes (Walker, Rahman, and Cave 2001).

Actor interaction:

Actor interaction is the process by which various actors engage in coordination, communication, and exchange (Edelenbos 2005). Indeed, policy design inherently necessitates the consideration of intricate interplay, communication, and dialogue among actors (Howlett 2020). Actors participating in the policy process may interact with convergent institutional logic or divergent behavioral patterns (Peters 2022). Therefore, policy designers must formulate interaction rules and foresee any potential unintended consequences stemming from their implementation, thereby fostering effective negotiations, dialogue, and interaction among actors (Peters and Fontaine 2022).

Actor objective:

The investigation of actor objectives pertains to the aspirations actors seek to fulfill through interactions (Howlett 2014). Objectives play a key role in achieving policy outcomes and serve as motivators for actors to engage in interactions (Grin and van de Graaf 1996). Inevitably, diverse actors involved in the public-policy process articulate varied interest claims during their interactions, potentially resulting in conflicts that hinder the evolution of policy processes. Policy design primarily centers on the allocation of policy instruments and the achievement of policy objectives (Howlett and Mukherjee 2014). Devising reasonable and sound policy tools and setting clear objectives effectively encourage actors to reach a consensus, address conflicts, and ultimately attain established goals.

The Process of Policy Design

Another aspect of the analytical framework developed in this study pertains to the policy design process. As our study specifically focuses on the civil servant personnel system, it employs the Employee Life Cycle theory and categorizes the policy design process into three distinct stages: entry, internal development, and exit phases (cf. Beer et al. 1984, 74-127), which terms these stages as Inflow, Internal flow, and Outflow. The Entry phase encompasses a range of activities centered on individuals external to governmental organizations preparing to join them (App, Merk, and Büttgen 2012). The internal development phase primarily

involves activities related to the career and professional development of actors within governmental organizations (App et al. 2012). The exit phase chiefly refers to a series of activities associated with actors leaving governmental organizations, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. In the following sections, the three phases are described in detail.

Entry phase (Inflow):

At this stage, the primary focus revolves around determining which actors are eligible to participate in the policymaking process (Beer et al. 1984, 74). Specifically, its emphasis lies in establishing rational, scientific, and standardized norms and criteria for selecting qualified actors (Cattermole 2019). For example, by establishing a set of recruitment principles and criteria that define job responsibilities and specify job positions, it determines which capabilities, qualities, characteristics, and values potential actors must possess to successfully complete specific tasks and achieve particular goals (Gladka, Fedorova, and Dohadailo 2022). In the entry phase of policy design, the process often functions as a *gatekeeper* tasked with selecting the most suitable actors for the organization, thereby facilitating the organization's achievement of its established objectives.

Internal Development Phase (Internal Flow):

During this phase of policy design, the primary emphasis is on devising strategies to regulate and motivate actors effectively, thereby facilitating organizational development and sustainability (Beer et al. 1984, 76). Within organizational management, the internal development phase connects the entry and exit phases. On the one hand, this phase extends the design activities initiated in the entry phase by formulating a set of interactive rules that standardize the conduct of newly admitted actors and incentivize them to pursue the organization's goals (Cattermole 2019). On the other hand, designing a series of evaluation and selection criteria identifies those actors whose contributions are not conducive to the organization's development, thereby developing a legitimate and rational rationale for their removal from the organization (Gladka et al. 2022).

Table 1. Analytic framework

Dimensions	Process of policy design		
	Entry Phase	Internal Development Phase	Exit Phase
Actor structure	Before new actors enter the organization, a stable social relationship is formed among the existing actors.	Following the integration of new actors into the organization, a stable social relationship is established among the diverse actors.	During the process of actors departing from the organization, a stable social relationship is formed among the actors.
Content of policy design	Before new actors enter the organization, the behaviors of interaction, coordination, and communication among the existing actors are examined.	Following the integration of new actors into the organization, the behaviors of interaction, coordination, and communication among diverse actors are examined.	During the process of actors departing from the organization, the behaviors of interaction, coordination, and communication among the existing actors.
Actor objective	Before new actors enter the organization, the objectives and values that actors within the organization are committed to achieving.	Following the integration of new actors into the organization, the objectives and values that different actors strive to achieve through their interactions.	During the process of actors departing from the organization, the goals and values are pursued through the interactions of actors.

Exit Phase (Outflow):

In this exit phase, policy design primarily concerns identifying which actors should depart from the organization and establishing procedures for their exit (Beer et al. 1984, 91). By developing a set of exit norms and criteria that encompass the determination of exit conditions, fulfillment of exit requirements, and the protection of actors' rights, this phase ensures a rational and orderly flow of actors between organizations (Singh 2019). Furthermore, the policy design during the exit phase is a *stabilizer* that emphasizes humanitarian measures throughout the exit process, thereby enabling actors who impede the organization's goals to depart smoothly (Cattermole 2019). Consequently, the organization can maintain its organizational capacity and support its sustained development.

According to the above two dimensions, we constructed a 3×3

analytical framework, as depicted in Table 1, which we applied to analyze the changes in Chinese civil servant personnel policies from 1993 to 2023.

Method

This study adopts qualitative content analysis as its primary research method. Content analysis systematically analyzes textual information and quantifies the frequency of keywords to reveal the underlying policy design logic (Halperin and Heath 2017). As authoritative policy documents, civil servant personnel management policies reflect the core understanding of Chinese policymakers regarding civil servant management and serve as an effective tool for researchers to examine the policy design of the Chinese civil servant personnel management system.

For data collection, this study used the Peking University Law Database, which is recognized for its comprehensive and standardized nature. By using “civil servant” as the search keyword, a total of 462 policy and regulatory documents issued by the State Council and its ministries, as well as the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, were initially retrieved from 1993 onward. Given the uniformity and standardization of civil servant personnel management systems, we further refined the selection of texts based on the following criteria: (1) only documents directly related to civil servant management issued by key departments, such as the State Council, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee were retained; (2) only documents with content directly related to the “civil servant personnel management system” were considered.

During the filtering process, 235 documents were eliminated because of redundancy (e.g., documents forwarded by agencies such as the Oceanic Bureau or the Ministry of Water Resources). Next, 141 documents that were either too specific to particular years or had low relevance to personnel system policies (e.g., “*2001 East-West Civil Servant Training Plan*”) were removed. Finally, a policy document corpus comprising 86 relevant documents was compiled and used as the sample for this study.

Key Findings

The Entry Phase of Policy Design

The Design of Actor Structure: Decentralization of Recruitment Authority

One notable trend between 1993 and 2023 was the decentralization of the recruitment authority in actor structures at the entry stage, as illustrated in the following analysis.

From the perspective of intergovernmental relations, the decentralization of recruitment authority has become increasingly evident over time (Yan and Xu 2021). Prior to 2007, personnel departments at the municipal level and below were required to strictly adhere to the regulations set by provincial authorities. This hierarchical system left little flexibility for local governments to tailor recruitment processes to regional specificities (Burns 1994). However, given the significant regional differences between some provinces and autonomous regions in China, it is difficult for provincial personnel authorities to meet the recruitment needs of certain prefecture-level cities. Therefore, since 2007, provincial supervisory departments—specifically, personnel management agencies—have delegated recruitment responsibilities to prefecture-level city governments and retained supervisory oversight. This delegation has allowed these local governments to design their own recruitment policies, thus granting them greater autonomy and discretion (Burns 1994). A key advantage of this shift is that prefecture-level cities can develop recruitment rules that are better suited to local governance challenges. However, owing to differences in administrative capacity and policy expertise across local governments, disparities in recruitment standards may emerge within the decentralization design.

The Design of Actor Interaction: More Institutionalized Interaction

Between 1993 and 2023, a shift toward more institutionalized interaction marked the design of actor interaction during the entry stage, as evidenced by the developments discussed in the subsequent section.

The design of actor interaction within the Chinese civil servant management system has gradually become more institutionalized over time. Before 2005, interactions among actors involved in the design of civil servant management policies were highly unstructured and uninstitutionalized. The lack of standardized and unified interaction

norms may lead to significant instances of unfair recruitment across various regions and disrupt social equity. Prior to 2005, China lacked unified standards for medical examinations for individuals entering the civil servant system. It was not until the emergence of the “First Hepatitis B Discrimination Case” in 2003 that the central government began to pay attention to this issue. In this case, a civil service candidate was rejected by the Personnel Bureau of Wuhu City, Anhui Province, on the grounds of being a carrier of the hepatitis B virus and subsequently sued the bureau for violating his legal rights.¹ The judgment in this case directly contributed to the establishment of formal medical examination standards.² Overall, the institutionalization of actor interaction in the entrance stage of civil servant management in China has led to enhanced procedural fairness and standardized recruitment practices.

The Design of Actor Objectives: Prioritized Professional Goals

From 1993 to 2023, apparent revealing characteristics could be identified regarding the design of actor objectives in the entrance stage: prioritized professional goals. This prioritization of professional goals is evident in several policy initiatives, as discussed below.

Professional goals in the design of actor objectives at the entrance stage have become increasingly prominent, particularly in terms of setting clear qualification standards for civil service candidates. These goals aim to build highly competent and professional civil servant personnel, characterized by firm beliefs, dedication to public service, diligence, accountability, and integrity. Prior to 2017, professionalization requirements in civil servant recruitment remained loosely defined, primarily emphasizing general moral and political qualities while lacking clear criteria for specialized skills and competencies.³ However, after 2017, a significant shift was observed toward clarifying and deepening the concept of professionalization.⁴ The revised recruitment standards introduced more specific and targeted requirements. For example, the updated standards began emphasizing not only ethical and political qualities but also mental resilience, problem-solving abilities, and domain-specific knowledge. This shift in focus has greatly contributed to the optimization of civil servants’ qualities. Statistics reveal that, compared to 2006, the proportion of civil servants with a university degree or higher increased from 43% to 71.9% in 2017.⁵ This upward

trend reflects an increasing emphasis on educational qualifications as a key criterion for the recruitment of civil servants (Wang 2025; Chou 2007). By refining these educational standards, the recruitment system has progressively ensured that chosen civil servants are better equipped to handle the complexities of public administration in China (Lan and Hu 2008).

The Internal Development Phase of Policy Design

The Design of Actor Structure: Persistence of Territorial Management and the Rise of Horizontal Collaboration Across Departments

Between 1993 and 2023, the design of actor structures during the internal development stage exhibited two key features: the persistence of the territorial management approach and the emergence of horizontal collaboration across departments. These two features are demonstrated through specific developments in the following sections.

The first feature of the design of actor structure at the internal development stage is the persistence of the territorial management approach. Over the past thirty years, the Chinese personnel management structure during the internal development stage has consistently adhered to the principle of “territorial management.” The territorial administrative system emphasizes the local governments’ management of administrative affairs, including the management of civil servants, within a given jurisdiction. This means that personnel departments (such as human resource departments and departments to which civil servants belong) at various levels are responsible for overseeing the personnel affairs of Chinese civil servants, such as training, assessment, rewards, and disciplinary actions.⁶ The adoption of a territorial governance approach to manage civil servants in the Chinese context has multiple benefits. For local governments, the territorial governance approach can tailor civil servant management policies to suit regional needs while adhering to national guidelines, further seeking a balance between the authoritative control of the central government and effective governance at the entrance stage of the Chinese civil servant personnel management system.

The second feature is strengthened cooperation among government entities at the horizontal level. Compared to the structural design of the entry phase, interdepartmental collaborative relationships are becoming

increasingly relevant at this stage. Over the past few decades, the necessity of greater coordinated, cross-departmental involvement for the effective governance of civil servant systems has been recognized. For example, in the area of civil servant training, rather than each department independently managing its own training programs, a concerted effort has emerged to integrate the resources and expertise. This can be observed in the collaboration between different government agencies (including Human Resources and Social Security Agencies) and external training bodies, such as universities and party schools, to deliver training programs for civil servants.⁷ This horizontal collaboration among various government agencies in the internal development stage of civil servant management may facilitate resource sharing, coordinated actions, and better management performance (Mu, de Jong, and Koppenjan 2018).

The Design of Actor Interaction: Increasing Transparency and Refinement of Interaction Mechanisms

Between 1993 and 2023, the design of actor interaction in the internal development phase underwent significant evolution, characterized by two key trends: increasing transparency of interactions and refinement of interaction mechanisms.

First, the transparency of the interactions among the actors involved significantly improved over time at the internal development stage. Transparency of interactions primarily refers to the extent to which decision-making processes are made visible and accessible to relevant stakeholders, ensuring that decisions are open to public scrutiny and reducing information asymmetry (Meijer 2013). For example, before 2008, granting awards to civil servants mainly involved internal deliberations within agencies, with decisions made through a three-step process: an internal recommendation based on consultations with colleagues, a review by the personnel department, and final approval by the relevant authority (notably referring to the civil servant's respective government department or its superior authority). A key criticism of this reward process is that it lacks sufficient public scrutiny by general social members, thus encountering the risk of injustice. In response, a mandatory seven-day public disclosure period was introduced in 2008.⁸ This measure significantly increased transparency by allowing broader oversight of the reward process in the Chinese civil servant

personnel management systems by external stakeholders (Chou 2007). Consequently, the legitimacy of the civil servants' internal development management has improved (Hu 2017).

Second, the interactions of the actors involved in the development stage of civil servant management have become more refined. This trend was particularly evident in the field of performance evaluation. Before 2007, civil servants' performance was categorized into three tiers: excellence, competence, and incompetence.⁹ In 2007, this three-tier system shifted, and a basic competent category was introduced. To some degree, this new change has attempted to better identify civil servants' performance differences to develop more effective mechanisms to motivate civil servants' work drives (Liu and Dong 2012). However, this refinement failed to distinguish high performers from average ones because of the blurred boundary between the competent and basic competence categories, ultimately diminishing individual competitive behaviors and organizational effectiveness.

The Design of Actor Objectives: Significant Diversification of Goals

Compared with policy design at the entry stage, civil servant management in the internal development stage has presented a significant diversification of goals. This diversification has been reflected in various reforms and policy shifts, as discussed in the following sections.

Since 1993, the goal of representing people's interests has gained prominence, with commitments such as the principle of "serving the people," which emphasizes the government's duty to prioritize public interests. This principle has been greatly highlighted in the management of civil servants at the internal management stage. For example, the regulation has explicitly suggested that civil servants who effectively uphold public interests or contribute to policy implementation with high public satisfaction are eligible for rewards.¹⁰ Serving the people and representing the interests of the public reveal the socialist nature of the Chinese government, and they are two key features of Chinese governance. Establishing them as two principles in managing civil servants in their internal development stage enables them to institutionalize public interests in their minds, which are the foundations for the legitimacy of the state.

Second, efficiency has become a key value in the design of actor

goals during the internal development stage. Taking the policy design of civil servant performance evaluation as an example, before 2007, the focus of civil servant “performance” was on the quantity, quality, and effectiveness of work. However, after 2007, the requirement for “efficiency” was explicitly included.¹¹ This shift aligns with the principles of New Public Management, which emphasizes performance measurement, results-based governance, and a greater focus on outcomes (Hood 1991). However, while these evolving goals reflect a broader vision for governance, the practical measures for achieving “efficiency” remain insufficient or underdeveloped. For instance, despite its formal inclusion in performance evaluations in the internal development of civil servants in China, efficiency is often vaguely defined and lacks clear operational metrics. In conclusion, although efficiency has received increasing attention in policy design, its vague definition and lack of clear implementation strategies hinder the effective translation of policy intentions into practice (Howlett 2014).

The Exit Phase of Policy Design

The Design of Actor Structure: More Defined Horizontal Collaboration

During this exit phase, the policy design of actor structures presents a key feature: the emergence of a more defined horizontal collaboration among different government agencies. This feature manifests in the institutional arrangements discussed in the next section.

Before 2019, when a civil servant submitted a resignation application to the appointment and removal authorities, the Personnel Department directly reviewed the application without consulting other departments. However, since 2019, the Personnel Department has collaborated with the civil servant’s unit, the Discipline Inspection and Supervision Organs, and the Confidentiality Authorities during the review process. For instance, if a senior official from a regulatory agency resigns, the Discipline Inspection and Supervision Organs assess whether any unresolved disciplinary issues exist, while the Confidentiality Authorities determine whether the individual had access to sensitive information requiring post-employment restrictions.¹² This inter-agency collaboration enhances transparency and ensures procedural legitimacy while safeguarding both national security and individual rights.

The Design of Actor Interaction: Emphasis of Duties and Responsibilities

Between 1993 and 2023, the design of actor interactions at the exit stage presented a key feature: the emphasis on duties and responsibilities in actor interactions, which will be elaborated in detail below.

Before 2005, resignation was considered an individual right, with civil servants having substantial discretion over their decision to resign. This meant that they could leave their positions freely based on personal choices, reflecting the voluntary nature of their resignations. This policy provided flexibility and enhanced career mobility, allowing individuals to pursue new opportunities and reduce long-term job stagnation (Tessema et al. 2017). However, high voluntary resignation rates also posed challenges, such as workforce instability and increased recruitment costs. In response to these concerns, the *take-responsibility-and-resign* principle was introduced in 2005, requiring civil servants to step down if they failed to fulfill their duties adequately.¹³ This shift signified a stronger emphasis on responsibility- and performance-based governance. Unlike the previous voluntary system, this framework incorporated mandatory elements whereby civil servants who failed to meet their responsibilities could be removed from office. By institutionalizing accountability, this design of actor interaction reinforced the principle that public officials must take their roles seriously, aligning with broader efforts to enhance policy implementation and governance effectiveness (Hu 2017).

The Design of Actor Objectives: Shifting Focus from Personal Benefits to Organizational Interests

The evolution described during the exit stage reflects a key characteristic of actor objectives: the shift from emphasis on personal benefits toward emphasis on organizational interests. This transition is captured in the development outlined below.

Before 2019, policy design regarding the exit of civil servants focused primarily on safeguarding personal benefits. For instance, civil servants who were dismissed were entitled to unemployment insurance or severance pay, and those who disputed resignation-related matters had the right to appeal. This regulation highlights the priority given to personal benefits, ensuring that civil servants could exit the system with financial security and legal protection (Gao 2009). However, since 2019, the design of civil servant exit policies has increasingly emphasized

Table 2. Key findings

Dimensions	Process of policy design			
	Entry Phase	Internal Development Phase	Exit Phase	
Actor structure	Decentralization of recruitment authority	Persistence of territorial management and the rise of horizontal collaboration across departments	More defined horizontal collaboration	
Content of policy design	Actor interaction	More institutionalized interaction	Increasing transparency and refinement of interaction mechanisms	Emphasis on duties and responsibilities
	Actor objective	Prioritized professional goals	Significant diversification of goals	Shifting focus from personal benefits to organizational interests

organizational and institutional interests. A clear example of this shift is the requirement that resigning civil servants must complete the necessary handover procedures within a designated timeframe to ensure work continuity.¹⁴ In short, this regulatory shift signifies a growing emphasis on organizational stability and continuity, ensuring that individual departures do not undermine institutional effectiveness.

Table 2 presents a summary of the key findings across the different phases of policy design.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study aims to delve into the policy design rationale underpinning the Chinese civil servant personnel management system from 1993 to 2023. To answer this research question, we constructed an analytical framework consisting of two dimensions: the content of policy design and the process of policy design. Our study uncovered three distinct characteristics of policy design regarding the Chinese civil

servant personnel management system.

First, we have found that the designed actor structure regarding the management of civil servants exhibited a discernible shift from a centralized to a contingency approach. Specifically, lower-level governments now possess greater autonomy in their jurisdictions. This shift indicates that while the overarching management framework remains intact, local governments have started playing increasingly critical roles in determining the creation and implementation of civil servant management policies. This means that lower-level government agencies have gained the discretionary space to implement policies that align with regional needs and administrative capacities. This transformation suggests a balance between central oversight and local flexibility, allowing civil servant personnel management to be both standardized and adaptable (Li 2010). However, such decentralization also presents challenges, as variations in implementation may lead to inconsistencies in policies across different regions.

Second, over the past three decades, the designed civil servant personnel system in China has gradually transitioned from informal and unstructured to institutionalized. The institutionalized approach refers to the formalization of key personnel processes, where clear and uniform criteria are established across different administrative levels (Heidbreder 2011). For example, recruitment has become more structured, with standardized requirements for political integrity, psychological suitability, and relevant experience, ensuring consistency in personnel selection. This process fosters a fair civil servant management system by reducing discretion and controlling arbitrariness. Furthermore, there has been a clear shift toward greater transparency within civil servant management systems. This is evident in the rewarding of civil servants. For example, since 2008, procedures for granting rewards to civil servants have incorporated public disclosure and mandatory review periods to ensure that decisions are more visible and open to scrutiny. This increased transparency enhances accountability within the hierarchical system by making higher-level officials more answerable to both their subordinates and the public. Additionally, it fosters civil servants' trust in their employing institutions, as employees can observe and assess the fairness and legitimacy of the reward process.

Third, our study has revealed that over the past three decades, the

personnel management system for civil servants in China has increasingly highlighted the diversification of objectives. Over time, it could be easily observed that the civil servant personnel management system in China has gradually incorporated multiple values, such as professionalism, representation, and fairness (Jing and Zhu 2012). This reflects the growing recognition that a successful civil service system requires more than just functional efficiency (Hu 2017); it must also account for the need to nurture a highly skilled and specialized workforce, ensure broad representation across different social and political groups, and maintain fairness to support long-term legitimacy. However, despite these advancements, several challenges remain. For instance, fairness in practice remains imperfect, as mechanisms to ensure equal opportunities may not fully address regional and sectoral disparities. At the same time, efficiency goals often remain abstract, lacking concrete criteria and actionable strategies for implementation.

While these findings contribute to our understanding of the evolution of the Chinese civil servant system, an analysis of future policy design and development is essential to guide continuous reforms. Moving forward, considering the emerging challenges and opportunities posed by new technologies and evolving societal needs is crucial. For example, big data and artificial intelligence (AI) could be harnessed to streamline decision-making, enhance accountability, and facilitate a more transparent governance model in the Chinese civil servant personnel management system (Wu, Yan, and Vyas 2020).

Furthermore, the actor structure and interaction mechanisms need to be further optimized. As the Chinese civil service continues to grow and evolve, fostering better coordination and collaboration across government departments is essential for addressing complex challenges, ensuring that policies are not only implemented but also iteratively adjusted to address shifting political priorities, governance challenges, and societal expectations (Mu, de Jong, and Koppenjan 2018; Mu and Cui 2024). Additionally, while the inclusion of professionalism, fairness, effectiveness, and representation is a step forward, the government may also explore ways to better integrate diverse policy objectives to enhance the adaptability and legitimacy of the civil servant personnel management system.

In conclusion, although this study offers valuable insights into

the historical development of Chinese civil servant personnel systems, future research must explore how to harness new technologies and refine governance models to address the evolving dynamics and challenges of the 21st century. The future of the Chinese civil servant personnel management system lies not only in institutional evolution but also in its ability to respond to emerging digital and socio-political transformations.

Despite its several contributions, this present study acknowledges several limitations. The method employed may not be sufficiently comprehensive or systematic to fully uncover the design rationale embedded in the institutional texts. Consequently, more first-hand data should be obtained in the future to gain more in-depth insights into the design rationale underlying the personnel management of Chinese civil servants.

Notes

- 1 A detailed case can be found in the China Court Network: <https://www.chinacourt.org/article/detail/2018/11/id/3584900.shtml> (accessed November 11, 2024).
- 2 In 2005, the Ministry of Personnel and the Ministry of Health jointly issued the first document on physical examination standards: *General Standards for Civil Servant Recruitment Physical Examinations (Trial Implementation)*.
- 3 This can be seen in Article 1 of the *Provisions on Civil Servant Recruitment (Trial)*.
- 4 This can be seen in Article 1 of the *Regulations on Civil Servant Recruitment (2019 Revision)*.
- 5 This statistic can be found on the Chinese government website [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/30/content_5353506.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/30/content_5353506.htm) (accessed December 30, 2024).
- 6 This can be seen in Article 22 of the *Provisional Regulations on Civil Servant Training* and Article 3 of the *Regulations on Civil Servant Assessment (2020 Revision)*.
- 7 This can be seen in Article 26 of the *Regulations on Civil Servant Training*.
- 8 This can be seen in Article 8 of the *Provisions on Civil Servant Rewards (Trial)*.
- 9 This can be seen in Article 5 of the *Interim Regulations on the Assessment of State Civil Servants*.
- 10 This can be seen in Article 3 of the *Interim Regulations on Rewards for State Civil Servants*.
- 11 This can be seen in Article 1 of the *Regulations on Civil Servant Performance Evaluation (Trial)*, which states: “In order to... improve work efficiency.”
- 12 This can be seen in Article 7 of the *Regulations on Civil Servants Resigning from Public Office*, issued in 2019.

- 13 This can be seen in Article 7 of the *Civil Servant Law*, issued in 2005.
- 14 This can be seen in Article 9 added in the *Regulations on the Resignation of Civil Servants*, issued in 2020.

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中国公务员人事管理制度的演变： 基于员工生命周期视角的政策设计分析

摘要: 自1993年建立以来,中国公务员人事管理制度经历了深刻的改革变迁。然而,现有研究并未对这些制度变迁背后的理论逻辑进行系统分析。为了填补这一研究空白,本研究基于政策设计与员工生命周期视角,建构了一个“3×3”的分析框架。该框架包括两个维度:政策设计内容(行动者结构、行动者互动与行动者目标)与政策设计过程(进入阶段、内部发展阶段与退出阶段)。研究发现,中国公务员人事管理制度在行动者结构方面,经历了从集权型的管理结构向具有更大地方自主性的分权型结构的转变。同时,公务员人事管理制度也实现了从非正式、非结构化的管理方式向更加制度化的管理过程的演进,其特征是管理程序的标准化和明晰化。最后,公务员人事管理制度越来越重视专业性、代表性、效能性与公平性等多元化的制度目标。

关键词: 公务员人事管理制度、政策设计、员工生命周期、内容分析、中国

중국 공무원 인사 시스템의 제도적 역학 이해: 직원 생애 주기 관점에서의 정책 설계 분석

초록: 1993년 수립된 이래, 중국의 공무원 인적자원관리제도는 심오한 개혁과 변천을 겪어왔습니다. 그러나 기존 연구는 이러한 제도 변천 뒤에 있는 이론적 논리를 체계적으로 분석하지 않았습니다. 이 연구 공백을 메우기 위해 본 연구는 정책 설계와 직원 생애 주기 관점을 바탕으로 '3×3' 분석 프레임워크를 구축하였습니다. 이 프레임워크는 정책 설계 내용(행위자 구조, 행위자 상호작용 및 행위자 목표)과 정책 설계 과정(진입 단계, 내부 발전 단계 및 퇴출 단계)의 두 가지 차원으로 구성됩니다. 연구 결과, 중국 공무원 인적자원관리 제도는 행위자 구조 측면에서 집권형 관리 구조에서 지역 자율성이 더욱 커진 분권형 구조로의 전환을 경험했습니다. 동시에, 공무원 인적자원관리제도는 비공식적이고 비구조화된 관리 방식에서 표준화되고 명료화된 관리 절차를 특징으로 하는 더욱 제도화된 관리 과정으로 진화했습니다. 마지막으로, 공무원 인적자원관리제도는 전문성, 대표성, 효율성, 공정성 등 다원화된 제도 목표를 점차 더 중시하게 되었습니다.

주제어: 공무원 인사 시스템, 정책 설계, 직원 생애 주기, 내용 분석, 중국

中国の公務員人事制度の制度的ダイナミクスの理解: 従業員ライフサイクルの視点からの政策デザイン分析

要旨: 1993年に中国の国家公務員制度が導入されて以来、大規模な改革が実施されてきました。しかし、これらの変更の背後にある理論的根拠は、まだ体系的に検討されていません。このギャップを埋めるため、本研究は政策デザインおよび従業員ライフサイクルの視点を取り入れ、3×3の分析フレームワークを開発しました。このフレームワークは、政策デザインの内容（アクター構造、アクター間の相互作用、アクターの目的）と政策デザインのプロセス（採用、内部育成、退出の各段階）という2つの主要な側面を含んでいます。研究結果は、公務員管理におけるアクター構造が、中央集権的なモデルから、地方の自律性が増すより分散的で条件付きのモデルへと顕著に変化していることを示しています。さらに、人事制度は、非公式で非構造的なアプローチから、標準化された手続きと明確な基準を特徴とするより制度化されたアプローチへと進化しており、専門性、代表性、効率性、公平性という目標に対する重要性の増大を反映しています。

キーワード: 公務員人事制度、政策デザイン、従業員ライフサイクル、内容分析、中国

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