

# Professionalization of Human Resource Management in China: The Role of Associations

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**Abstract**—Building on work examining the driving forces behind the rise and professionalization of human resource management (HRM) in China, this paper turns attention to the role of people management associations. In considering the rapid development of the HRM associations worldwide, there has been little exploration of the role of the professional associations in China. This is surprising given the unparalleled development of HRM in China. This paper explores whether something akin to a “professionalization project” is observable in China through an exploration of the major bodies and institutions driving such transformation. The research identifies the role of people management associations as agents of institutionalization in conjunction with the state and market. Focusing specifically on the role of people management associations, the paper examines the professional standards, membership and code of ethics documentation directly related to the manifestation of dedicated HR professional association activity. This activity will be contextualized globally by reference to similar material produced elsewhere in the world. A qualitative content analysis of people management associational documentation in China will then be conducted in conjunction with materials collected from HR governing body websites to provide knowledge of the normative composition of HR professionalization. Interview data will also be collected from the insights of associational actors and practitioners, such as the Human Resource Association (HRA) in Beijing, to discuss the prospects for HR professionalization in China.

**Index Terms**—human resource management, professionalization, China, associations

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing status of HR functions and added professionals’ strategic role in organizations, an increasing number of HR professional bodies which are capable of controlling entry to HR professional work or monopolizing HR expertise, are rapidly emerging worldwide, for example, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the United Kingdom and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the United States. In the case of China, the concept of human resource management (HRM) is relatively new and has emerged only after China’s transformation from a planned economy to a

market-oriented system. Following the adoption of the reform and open-up policy, China is becoming ever more significant in the world economy. Home to the world’s largest population, the most diverse groups of people ethnically and blessed with huge natural resources, it is set to continue being the key engine driving the global economy [1]. China has modernized rapidly and is destined to be the growth center of the world by 2025. Table I details a few vital statistics concerning the Chinese economy and the qualities of the people who comprise it.

TABLE I. A FEW VITAL STATISTICS ON PEOPLE AND ECONOMY IN CHINA

Population (Million, as of July 2013, rounded up)	1349
Population rank in the world (As of July, 2013.)	1
Median age of population (As of July 2013, rounded up)	36
Population below poverty line (% as of July 2011, rounded up)	13
Literacy rate (% of total population)	95
Total labor force (million; 2013)	798
GDP at purchasing power parity (in US\$ billion estimated 2012)	12,260
Stock of foreign direct investment at home (2012)	1344
Stock of foreign direct investment at home (ranked in the World, 2012)	3

SOURCE: NATIONAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS (2013)

Historically, China’s economic development has largely been driven by embracing a labor-intensive, export-oriented development strategy of main industries, with a firm foundation in HR and natural resources. Previously, however, China’s economy was dominated by agriculture before switching its focus to the industry and services sectors. More recently, during 2011-2015, China’s 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan marks a further turning point in economic priorities, with a shift from the country’s emphasis on GDP growth towards prioritizing strategies and measures to ensure long-term prosperity nationally. This latest transformation entails making an important shift toward sustainable development strategies. Thus, how will China develop its economy in the next five or ten years is an important strategic issue and is an issue of balancing, or rebalancing, different economic models. In order to obtain sustainable competitiveness, how to

maintain and exploit potentials of human resources in China is an urgent issue facing both the central government and executives in the more volatile business environment. Therefore, whether some “professionalization project” is observable in China and how to professionalize HR professionals is worth of exploring. In this paper, the authors highlight the roles of associations during the process of professionalization and analyze the characteristics of HR profession in China compared to the United Kingdom and the United States.

## II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HR PROFESSION

Although the process of professionalization of HR can be long-winded and complex, HRM has advanced quickly [2]. In many jurisdictions it has created a body of knowledge that can be used as education and training for skills; a certification system through which courses and examinations can be designed; a code of professional ethics to guide certified members’ behavior and, perhaps most significantly a powerful professional association [3] to promote the occupation.

Drawing on a trait theory of professions, Fanning (2011) identified nine characteristics that define a profession and positioned HR in relation to them. The nine characteristics identified as defining a profession comprise the presence of a governing body, certification, education and training, a body of knowledge, code of ethics and discipline, legal status, a research base, independence, contribution to society, and recognition. Using a combination of low professional status indicators and high professional status indicators, Fanning (2011) concluded that HR should be described as ‘semi-professional’ since it scored highly on some indicators but lowly on others. In other words, while some progresses had been made it was not sufficient to label HR a full profession. Based on these characteristics, our paper explains the roles of relevant institutional organizations which promote the development of HR professionalization in Chinese settings.

## III. INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS

The role of HR has grown and evolved significantly over the past century, motivating professional associations in the field to likewise adapt. In fact, 91 percent of professional HR associations have changed their titles and the scope of their services since their founding, and most have made such changes more than once [4], for example, the American Society for Personnel Administration (ASPA) founded in 1948 turned to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) now. Like other counterparts in many fields, professional HR associations, aim to keep members informed, interconnected, and employed with equipment of essential knowledge and skills. Through necessary communication, training, conferences, publications, local chapters, and even government lobbying, HR professional bodies have achieved continuous goals in the process. In China, one biggest difference in the process of HR professionalization is the power of the

state, which exerts lasting influence on HR related bodies. In the following, the main institutional actors and their roles will be analyzed.

### A. Ministry of Human Resource and Social Security

In 2008, after the Eleventh National People's Congress meeting of the Fourth Plenary Session, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China (MOHRSS) was established in order to improve the employment and social security system. In particular, MOHRSS was created following the merger of the Ministry of Personnel and the Ministry of Labor and Social Security. The creation of the new body reflects the State Council's ‘Institutional reform and functional transformation program’, opening a new round of merging ministries reform. The formation of MOHRSS indicates the significance of HRM in the development of China and the role of HR professionals within organizations, as well as emphasizing the advantages of human resources, the importance of a unified and standardized human resources market, reinforcing the rational flow of human resources, their effective allocation, and overall employment and social security policies. The main responsibilities of the MOHRSS is to co-ordinate the preparation of human resources management and social security policies, improve the public employment service system, reinforce the income distribution system of labors. At the same time, China formed the State Civil Service Bureau and State Foreign Experts Bureau in order to enhance the management of talents in public sectors and international human resources, which are administered by Human Resources and Social Security Ministry.

Following establishment, the MOHRSS it has become the most authoritative human resources management agency, which is the most critical organization the State authority to initiate policies and plans of people management nationwide. It involves many different areas such as policies in enterprises and institutions, urban and rural employment and social security.

The main functions of the MOHRSS are to produce and elaborate human resources policies, to draw up laws and regulations related to HRM, and to organize their implementation and supervision. In addition, the ministry cooperates with other relevant departments to lead reforms of the personnel system, making HRM policies and developing workers service in institutions and agencies, and participating in talent management. From a legislative angle, MOHRSS is also able to provide advice and suggestion to Ministry of Justice for implementation of relevant laws. For example, two statutes were intensified on January 2008: One is the new Labor Contract Law and the other is the Employment Promotion Law that introduced equal employment opportunity. The Social Insurance Law also considered policies issued in MOHRSS, which became effective on 1 July 2011, and is the first comprehensive law in China's social insurance system to cover both urban and rural residents and to highlight the rights of the insured.

In the process of professionalization, the MOHRSS formulates people-orientated policies for professional and

technical personnel management, for example, continuing education policies. Further, the ministry is encouraging professionals' selection and training at high level in order to attract more talents both domestic and abroad to work in the area of HRM in China. Additionally, the most influential HR professional certification scheme is organized and issued by MOHRSS. In particular, it forms the basis of HR professionalization in China and contains professional qualification accreditation system as one of its main functions (Development and Management of Human Resources 2006). The professional HR certification scheme has matured to become the largest occupational assessment process, and a total of 200,000 people had taken the examination by 2006. In 2006, major changes took place to improve the examination system for the HR professional qualifications. The revised system emphasizes knowledge renewal and the development of competence. It marks a departure from the existing emphasis on degree qualifications in the profession.

In short, the state, via MOHRSS, exerts a major influence on the development of the HR profession through its various policies and extended sectors across different levels in China.

#### *B. Central Organization Department*

Central Organization Departments exist at all levels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and have great control over personnel system at all levels of government and enterprises, which is a distinguishable feature of the Chinese personnel system. This agency is in charge of leadership selection, training, promotion, evaluation, and disciplinary actions, not only for leaders of its own party and various levels of government agencies, but also for managerial personnel in medium to large-sized SOEs. It has its own system of training and development, such as an education division and a party school at virtually all levels, from the central government to local counties.

The most important department to appoint cadres in influential positions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the Organization Department, for example, the MOHRSS was appointed by the Central Organization Department, which is committed to planning, studying and guiding management system, policies and regulations, plus reforming the cadre and personnel system. This department not only provides advice about adjustment, appointment and removal of cadres in the Central Management Unit but is also primarily responsible for the macro-management of the national talents and qualified personnel. In particular, it formulates policies and regulations to lead national and overseas talents agendas, as well as contacting senior professionals to carry out relevant tasks. The role it plays on professionalization is that it develops international cooperation and exchanges in order to train professionals in the management field, who are very valuable people for Chinese organizations both in the public sector and the private sectors. For instance, the 'One Thousand Talent Plan' which aims to attract international talents return to China for engagement in different industries was implemented by Central Organization Department.

From the policy perspective, it is still leading the most advanced experiences and practice regarding how to professionalize people who work directly for CCP, especially cadres in critical positions, providing specific cases on HRM in public sectors.

#### *C. Chinese Academic of Personnel Science*

As a research center, Chinese Academic of Personnel Science (CAPS) undertakes research on theories and policies of human resources and public administration. CAPS has made great progress on public administration, human resource management, human science and other disciplines. It is leading the "Civil Law" implementation, reform the payment system, reform of personnel system, as well as construction of talent market.

In the process of professionalization of HRM, it focuses on doing research on qualified professionals with expertise in strategic planning, quality evaluation and performance management in public and private sectors. Other important aspects of HR professional development are research regarding the human resources market system, professional intermediary system, certification, and comparative study of international human resources services. Expertise of occupational classification and evaluation standards of professional competence are also in the range of the CAPS research list. It provides evidence for standard procedures and methods of human resources professional development. This organization is more like an association, which provides substantial materials with regard to how to do research and shows productive outcomes on HRM practices.

#### *D. Human Resource Association*

There are almost half a million human resources (HR) practitioners in the United States and thousands more in countries around the world [5]. However, the development of HR professional association in China is still undeveloped. The counterpart to the CIPD in the United Kingdom or the SHRM in the United States, in China is the Human Resource Association for Chinese and Foreign Enterprises, Beijing (HRA). The HRA is a non-profit corporation that was founded in 1996 and officially registered with Beijing Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau in March 1998 and is under the control of Beijing Business Bureau. Currently the HRA has over 1000 corporate members, most of which are Fortune 500 companies and leading Chinese corporations. With the passing of time the HRA has become the most established Human Resource Association in China, with the largest groups of members.

In terms of organization, the HRA currently has 25 Board Members, 19 council members, three supervisors, and seven consultants. They are: Compensation and Benefit Committee; Learning and Developing Committee; Employee Relations Committee; Member Service and Events Committee; Recruitment Committee; Japanese Corporation Committee; Korean Corporation Committee. These professional committees conduct research in their respective areas and are committed to sharing best practices of various industries and enterprises. HRA Board members and the professional committees are volunteers from the corporate HRM practitioners.

HRA provides comprehensive information, expert advice and data as well as a full range of professional development opportunities to members. As an indispensable partner, HRA provides the industry's sharing practices and networking platform for HR practitioners. Its purpose is to explore, learn, promote and develop the concept and practice of HRM; training in modern HRM professionals; providing communication and learning platform for HR professionals; become a bridge between business and government as well.

In September 2006, HRA was formally accepted as a member of the Asia-Pacific Human Resources Management Association (APHRMA), which is the only member of APHRMA to be accepted from Mainland China so far. Joining APFHRM as one of the counterparts showed that HRA enjoys respect and recognition both at home and abroad for promoting HRM since its foundation. Its inclusion on the APHRMA means that the HRA will have more opportunities to promote international sharing and exchange to contribute its efforts in the future.

### 1) Membership

TABLE II. HRA-CATEGORIES OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP

Type	Requirement
Fellow membership	A. At least one nomination of the fellow member; B. Have an important contribution to the following aspects (need accompany with the support cases) my organization's human resource management; or, HRA (volunteers, instructor, sharing guests) C. Meet the job responsibilities and competencies needs. (Refer to the description in "HR Professional Standards" for a fellow member using the way of elaborate cases) Supplement materials: Own about 15 years of HR work experiences. Have at least three years experiences in strategic HR management before application.
Certified professional membership	A. Has been obtained a degree of Bachelor degree or above; B. One already has at least 7 years working experiences in HR before application; C. One already has the necessary job competencies and responsibilities. (Refer to the description in Annex "HR professional standards" for the fellow members using the way of specific cases.) Supplement materials: One has successfully completed HRA certification programs (Practical Reward certification, HR Business Partner certification) and gets the corresponding certificate or assessment. Please attach a copy of the certificate or assessment results.
Professional membership	A. Have been completed and earned a bachelor degree or above; Supplement materials: One has successfully completed basic course of modern human resource management and obtain the corresponding certificates in HRA. Please attach a copy of the certificate or assessment results.
Student Membership	A. One is now studying a full-time major in universities; B. One studies Human Resources and related majors, or studying training courses and programs of human resources approved by HRA.
Associate Membership	Those who temporarily do not meet the above requirements of professional development paths, or members who need to apply knowledge of human resource management at work.

Source: The official website of HRA.

In 2011, the HRA launched a "HR professional standard model," and simultaneously launched a personal membership scheme. As an important part of the Association's "Human resources professional standard model" project, the membership system will define the human resources professional standards and recognize HR as a profession. It will also provide the basis to make knowledge and work experience the core criteria as a standard to apply for admission in 2010 under the membership system. Table II outlines the key professional membership categories that offered by the Association. These are divided into fellow membership, certified professional membership, professional membership, student membership, and association membership. Compared to other countries, the membership of HRA follows a similar approach adopted by other professional associations based on the international cooperation. It represents a form of mimetic institutionalization, something which is not unusual in the formation of new managerial professions. Just as one senior HR manager who is the Committee Member of HRA and also the HR Compensation and Benefit Professional in IBM (China) Company Limited said:

"We have cooperation with professional associations in other countries. We have cooperation with Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM); the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (HKCIPD); World at Work the Total Rewards Association (WAW); the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI); Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management (HKIHRM). Inside, HRA officially registered with Beijing Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau and under control of Beijing Business Bureau. So we also have cooperation with our government and its extended public sectors. We share HR practices with governmental HR associations in many provinces."

### 2) Professional standards

TABLE III. HRA-PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR HR

Type	Content
Capability (HR competencies)	People-oriented Business sensitivity Judgment Communication influence Promotion strength
Body of Knowledge	1. HR and Business 1.1 Business knowledge of HR 1.2 Global / environment perspective 1.3 Business perspective 1.4 Organizational perspective 1.5 Individual perspective 1.6 Employer branding 1.7 Role of HR in business 1.8 Major HR Processes 2. HR-Related Legislations 2.1 Basic Legal Knowledge in China 2.2 Employment Ordinance 2.3 Social Security Act and the provisions of the housing fund 2.4 Employment Promotion Law 2.5 Confidentiality and non-competition 2.6 Industrial Relations and Trade Union Law 3. Human Resource Planning, Sourcing and Staffing 3.1 Manpower planning

	3.2 Job analysis 3.3 Job evaluation 3.4 Recruitment and talent configuration channels 3.5 Selection 3.6 Employment 3.7 Engagement 4. Reward Management 4.1 Reward management 4.2 Job analysis and evaluation 4.3 Base pay 4.4 Pay for performance 4.5 Benefits 4.6 Mergers & acquisitions 4.7 Payroll administration 4.8 International reward management 4.9 Reward communication 4.10 Employee health and safety management 5. Performance Management 5.1 Definition and development of performance management 5.2 Key elements of performance management 5.3 Introduction to performance management processes 5.4 Relationship between performance management and reward 5.5 Roles and responsibilities of HR and line management in performance management 6. Employee Relations, Employee Engagement and wellness 6.1 Employee relations 6.2 Employee relations program – objective and effectiveness 6.3 Staff communication 6.4 Induction and Orientation 6.5 Staff consultation and participation 6.6 Coaching and Counselling 6.7 Disciplinary action 6.8 Grievances handling 6.9 Employee engagement 7. Learning and Development 7.1 Learning & Development in the Organization 7.2 Linking Learning and Development Management with Business Needs 7.3 Linking Learning and Development Planning with HR Planning 7.4 Assessing Needs, Learning Design and Learning Methodologies 7.5 Training Delivery and Facilitation 7.6 Post-training Evaluation and Sustaining Effectiveness 8. Organization Development 8.1 OD as a process of change 8.2 Common models for organizational change 8.3 Phases of OD practice 8.4 Application of OD tools or options 8.5 Internal OD and skills 8.6 Building a Learning Organization 9. International HRM 9.1 International resourcing 9.2 Mobility & localization 9.3 Managing expatriates / diversity / international workforce 9.4 Understanding / managing culture of host country
Experience (HR Roles and Responsibilities)	HR Responsibilities - Certified Professional Members HR Business Partner (usually supported by professionals and / or service centers) Expertise Service center Generalist Strategic Human Resource Management

Source: The official website of HRA.

Similarly, the HRA has also established a professional standards scheme that also shares many of the same characteristics of professional HR associations around the world and contains three main elements, capabilities, knowledge and experience. These elements are shown in Table III. Most importantly, the HRA distinguishes the profession by the type of knowledge that the members master. One important characteristic of the process of professionalization is the standardized HRM knowledge and competencies that members of the profession should possess. Improving standards benefit to boost the HRM professional's status and authority with HR practitioners in organizations [6]. It can be seen that HRA creates a clear and detailed framework for knowledge and skills HR professionals should master from three perspectives-capability, knowledge and experience, capturing what HR practitioners do and deliver across every aspect and specialism of the profession. During the interview of HRA members, one HR Manager who engaged in Lenovo (China) mentioned:

"The role of HRA should be the partner of outstanding organizations and HR practitioners. Our task is to encourage HR practitioner to become more adaptable to the changing market and be more professional when doing HR jobs. HRA tries to give as many as opportunities for its members to become more professional. We try to improve the skills of employees from the company's business objectives and strategies and transform advanced management concepts and domestic and international business management experiences into diversified training solutions that provide internal training support services. HRA tries to improve HR practitioners' skills and the management level in the organization. So I would like to say that HRA is promoting professionalization."

### 3) Codes of ethics

Another important dimension of gaining professional status is the establishment of a code of ethics. Both CIPD and SHRM have a code of ethics program or policy that they require their members to adhere to. Similarly, the HRA requires that all members commit to the code. It can be seen from Table IV, that the code covers professional standards and behavior which influences the daily HR activities. Establishing a code of ethics expresses the relationship between the HRM professional, other managers and non-managers in the organization. A code of ethics also helps society learn the professional culture from the more experienced HRM professionals. HRA not only established a body of knowledge and standards for HR practitioners but also a clear statement of code of ethics. The code covers professional standards and behavior and as such affects the day to day activities of an HR practitioner.

TABLE IV. HRA CODES OF ETHICS

Professional Standards and competencies	A. Be familiar with organizational structure and business of the service companies; B. Maintain and devote continuous efforts to achieve the required level of competency necessary, such as enhancement of HR knowledge and keep up with the latest trends
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	and practices in HR field. Thus, providing strategic guidance to enhance the capability of their own organization and its people; C. Demonstrate a devotion to promoting ethical awareness among fellow professionals.
Professional conduct and ethics	General Competencies Integrity Honesty Reliability Objectivity Due diligence Fairness Consistency Responsibility to and relationship with employers Responsibility to and relationship with employees Responsibility to customers as an external consultant Responsibility to and relationship with HRA

Source: The official website of HRA.

#### 4) SHRM in China

Another interesting example of mimetic influence sharing across cultures is that the U.S derived SHRM has established an office in China, which means the process of HR professionalization or named 'professionalization project' exists in China. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) is by far the largest HR professional association in terms of membership, 93% of Fortune 500 Companies are represented in SHRM's Membership [7]. SHRM aims to engage the full gamut of HR functions, while some associations focus on a more narrow scope.

Through the official website of SHRM and other relevant research conducted by SHRM, it can be shown that SHRM provides resources, global best practices and a network of valuable contacts to more than 275,000 members in over 160 countries, including U.S.-based HR professionals involved in global HR. As part of SHRM's commitment to developing the HR profession globally, SHRM opened its office in Beijing, China. To provide educational products to Chinese HR professionals, SHRM has entered into a partnership with China International Intellectual Corp (CIIC), Peking University, Top HR and Aura International, amongst others., for those companies and institutions to provide preparation programs for SHRM-CPTM & SCPTM certifications and other the professional development courses.

Multinational companies based in China will invest around the world, and their HR practitioners will need to understand the global environment. To help them, SHRM created the Learning System, which is preparatory material to support those practitioners who seek to obtain the SHRM-CPTM and SHRM-SCPTM certifications and also provide other training programs like Strategic HR advanced, Creating a Talent Acquisitions Strategy, Organizational Development and Effectiveness, Performance Management, HR Metrics and workforce Analytics, Employee Learning and Development, Workforce Planning, Succession planning, Global HR management, Developing Effective Coaching Skills, Management of Employee's Separation, HR Business Partners and SHRM China HR Generalist certificate

programs customized to meet the local needs. With higher expectation, HR professionals in China are more like to get involved in the global cooperation and move from operating domestically to operating globally as well as from initial to advanced stages. Many Chinese organizations that are abundant in strength and experience now regard the creation of a globalized enterprises as their main development goal, for example, the Alibaba China which is the world's leading platform for global trade, expanded its business into all over the world. With the inevitable trends of globalization, professionalizing HR is necessary and critical for Chinese organization both public sectors and private sectors to compete in the fast changing environment.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the role of people management associations in HR professionalization is important because it establishes institutional guidelines and develops policies which assist individual members to maintain and enhance the status of HR for the benefit of clients and the profession alike. In many instances, people management associations provide specific benefits to their members, including the ability to network and share experiences and advice. In some countries, the HR association is involved in advocacy activities on behalf of its membership to negotiate privileges and entitles such as certification or even licensure. In other countries, the association also acts as a bargaining body for its membership which can include lobbying governments for institutional ends.

Through analyzing institutional actors in China, this paper has explored the roles of associations on the process of HR professionalization. It has highlighted the relevant strategies and policies issued by the state via different organizations and how characteristics of HR profession developed in Chinese associations. By doing so, it is safe to say that Human Resource Management is on the road to professionalization and HR professional associations in China play significant roles in the process. In the future, with deepening market-oriented system in China, the needs of HR professionals would like to increase stably and progressively. Thus relevant HR associations will exert more powerful influence on HR professionalization.

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