Meline Tai

Overview

Central Institute for Correctional Police (CICP) is located about 140 kilometres outside the Chinese Capital City of Beijing. The Institute is a top ranking national university and has over 506 staff providing tertiary qualifications to over 6,300 students in correctional policing, justice and prison administration. As a national body, it reports directly to the Ministry of Justice in China.

In 2009 under the International Scholarship Program, CSNSW awarded a scholarship to one of CICP’s senior professor to participate in the Australian Correctional Leadership Program at Brush Farm Corrective Services Academy of CSNSW. This established a cooperative relationship between the Brush Farm Academy and CICP. To develop and strengthen this relationship, CICP reciprocated with an invitation for me to visit CICP for three weeks, study the Chinese correctional systems and present to their students and staff an overview of the history, recent and future developments in custodial and community corrections in NSW.

Students and staff in CICP were also interested in knowing more about Australian people and their culture. I took the opportunity to present a brief talk on this topic. To further broaden my experience I was also given the opportunity to participate in their promotion training program for senior correctional police.

During my visit, I have observed some similarities as well as differences between the Australian and Chinese correctional systems, the immediate challenges that the Chinese Authority is focusing on, and some of their strategies to manage these challenges. The followings are some of my observations.

Activities Undertaken In China

In summary, during my three weeks with CICP I visited an adult male prison, a female prison and a juvenile prison. I also had several briefing sessions with the heads and senior teaching staff of the Institute’s Administration Department, the Prison Administration Faculty, the Correctional Education Faculty, and the Information Management Faculty.

Institute staff and students were interested in NSW correctional officer employment model, its rank structure and pay scale, as well as the functions and operations of corrective services industries. In addition, I visited the Institute of Crime Prevention of the Chinese Ministry of Justice. The Crime Prevention Institute is a research body of crime statistics and trends. This is an organisation responsible for advising the Ministry of Justice and the Central Government on crime prevention policy.

I had also participated in five lectures given by the Institute’s professors to senior correctional police as part of their promotion requirements.
The lectures covered managerial issues ranging from preventing and resolving potential conflict of interests and corrupt situations; prisoner welfare programs; prisoner reform programs; adapting risk assessment tools from foreign countries to local use; enacting laws that recognise prisoner’s human rights within the criminal justice system; implementing local practices that protect and respect prisoner’s rights in line with China’s policy on protecting basic human rights; managing personal stress at work and at home and promoting mental wellbeing within correctional facilities.

Through an interpreter, I presented two lectures to over one hundred students and teachers on Australian correctional system and community corrections system, giving them an overview of the history, current issues and the future trends in these two areas.

At the end of each lecture, both students and teachers raised many insightful questions regarding correctional operations and management in Australia. In particular, students were very interested in our management of inmates with HIV, escapes, prison industries and programs. A lot of questions were also raised regarding the operations of community corrections, its objectives, security and safety issues within the community.

**Some Observed Differences**

Apart from the obvious political and cultural differences between the Chinese and Australian society, there are differences in the training model for correctional officers between the two countries.

The Chinese training model is unique in that CICP confers a university degree to their correctional officers. However, graduates are not provided nor guaranteed with a full time permanent job on graduation as the case for the permanent recruits in New South Wales (NSW) Australia. Though, the permanent recruits in NSW will still need to pass their probation year before full permanency would be granted. In addition, Chinese correctional police graduates need to apply for correctional positions in provinces and local authorities. If they are successful in gaining a position, the province or local authority will then provide hands-on primary training before the graduates would be deployed to correctional facilities.

However, due to their tertiary degree status, their job opportunities extend beyond the correctional field. As graduates are trained in wider areas including criminal laws, financial management and administration, they are qualified to apply for jobs in other professional areas such as litigation, prosecution, policing, banking and finance.

One of the stand-out differences between the Chinese and Australian correctional jurisdiction is that the Chinese Government places a lot of emphasis on reforming inmates through labour and correct political thinking.

The Chinese Government’s philosophy of reform through labour means that for inmates, working in industries or domestic jobs within the correctional centre are compulsory unless they are severely disabled physically or mentally. Inmates who performed good work will get more points which in turn assist them to progress through the system until their eventual release. China’s political system also means it places significant emphasis on educating inmates to uphold current political thinking and philosophy which emphasise on being a good citizen in a socialist society.
Immediate Challenges

From my observation, there are two immediate policy areas the Chinese Central Government is focusing on. One is on the issue of protecting prisoner’s basic human rights and the other is managing mental health issues of both staff and prisoners in the correctional environment.

Recently, the Chinese government has begun introducing psychological services for inmates in their facilities. It now has a policy to deploy dedicated resources to programs designed to enhance inmates’ mental health and their rehabilitation prospect. As well, it introduced psychological studies into their training curriculum to equip officers with some knowledge and skills on mental health management.

The Chinese Authority also recognises that correctional officers are working in a stressful environment due to the nature of the business. To assist staff in managing mental health issues, the Government began giving senior correctional managers psychological training and resources to develop their capability in recognising symptoms of stress and reducing level of stress for themselves and their staff.

Another point of difference between the two jurisdictions is that in China, correctional officers also take on the inmate welfare and program officer roles rather than having separate categories of staff as the case in NSW. In essence, Chinese correctional officers manage the total welfare and rehabilitation prospect of prisoners in their care.

Some Observed Similarities

Although the Chinese correctional system operates in a very different political and social environment from NSW, there are common issues concerning both authorities in areas such as providing and maintaining security and safety to the community; rehabilitate prisoners by providing an appropriate work and vocational training regime; providing effective education and behavioural change programs as well as managing the escalating costs of maintaining and expanding the correctional system.

Both systems are concerned with recidivism rate and in the case of China, separate and specific resources are devoted to the area of crime prevention in the form of researches on policies and programs for the purpose of providing evidence based policy advice to the Central Government.

Takeaway Idea and Concept

The Chinese concept of providing psychological training to front line staff to enable them to understand and monitor their own as well as their staff stress level is an empowering one. The concept aims to enhance front line officer’s ability in dealing with mental health issues either at work or in their own personal life.

If staff is able to recognise and monitor their own and other’s stress level and symptoms from an early stage, proactive measures could possibly be taken to address the stress issues early thus preventing deterioration.

If as a result of introducing this kind of training, front line staff becomes better equipped in dealing with stressful situation in a correctional environment, the flow on benefits to the organisation could be significant in terms of higher productivity, lower stress related illness and the cost of absenteeism.
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