

Some notes on the behavior of senior faculty towards junior faculty at HKUST

Late 2000s

In fall 2008, [senior colleague X] asked me to come to his office. He then started to berate me for appealing against the decision of the UASC/VPAA [University Appointments and Substantiation Committee / Vice President for Academic Affairs] to deny me full professorship. That soon turned into a rant about past issues to which I responded “I disagree.” I didn’t get many more words in before X interrupted me and continued his rant. In the course of his continuous rant, I managed to get in another two or three plain “I disagree.” When his exercise in bullying seemed to never end, I said, calmly, “I am leaving” and walked out, somewhat stunned and shaky, heading straight to the division office where I had photocopies to make for class. X, still in his office, shouted “Carsten” in an unappealing tone. I didn’t respond. He started to come running after me, I think still ranting. By the time he reached me I was in the general office in front of the copy machine. He stuck his head through the office door, glanced at the secretaries, and angrily whispered (presumably so the secretaries wouldn’t hear) something on the order of “childish, so childish,” then disappeared.

There is other, earlier behavior. The following two are somewhat easier to pin down than the underlying climate of putting down colleagues that finds its expression in a multitude of minuscule behavioral instances. (i) In spring 2007, in the lobby of RTHK, waiting for the radio show on my FEER [*Far Eastern Economic Review*] article, X said to a third person (a participant in the same radio show) who just walked in, “Have you seen this asshole, Carsten Holz.” (ii) Earlier, when my article was published, he sent a rather personal and critical email re me and the article to Chinapol, of which I was not part. He didn’t tell me and didn’t share with me what he wrote. Another member of Chinapol passed his email on to me. I confronted X and he apologized. (He also said he can guess who passed the email on to me, which suggests that when he submitted his email to Chinapol he knew I was not a member of Chinapol.)

In [colleague Z’s academic] review, I wrote my own, separate report based on my personal reading of this research. X didn’t like it and wanted to meet. I agreed if the division head was present. I then signed the committee letter under condition that my signature only signals my agreement to the final conclusion of recommending substantiation. The points raised in my separate (and now withdrawn) review never seemed to register with X, suggesting fundamentally different world views. I didn’t need to bundle the issues with X’s review, although the bundling has the advantage that it would force all higher level tiers to become aware of fundamental flaws in the review process (which they obviously can choose to ignore or deny).

After coming back from a normal university environment, Princeton, where I was being treated as a human being, similarly as I had been at Stanford and at Cornell, I had a highly unpleasant meeting with [Y], the then dean, on the occasion of he telling me the outcome of my review for full professorship. Then there was this meeting with X. At HKUST / in SOSC there is a long-established invisible conditioning to paternalistic (and degrading) patterns that I have difficulty stepping out of (conditioned to be on the receiving side). When I come back from normal university environments it’s easier to see the patterns and easier to refuse to engage in them, which obviously leads to confrontation with the other side. I have no interest in engaging with X beyond committee duties.